Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics between 16 April – 15 May 2014

By John VanPool, EGF Turkey and Black Sea Regional Analyst

Key Points:

- *Turkey faces up to the worst mining disaster in its history, while the prime minister bungles the official response. A deputy chief of staff for Erdogan is photographed kicking a protester, and accusations are levelled that the prime minister himself struck another.*
- *Turkey's top judge, with the prime minister in attendance, rebukes Erdogan in public statements in light of government criticism of the country's top courts.*
- *While Turkey's economic growth relies on substantial imports of Russian energy, the fate of the Crimean Tatars seems to remain outside the Turkish regional agenda.*
- *Alawites and Alevis, two religious minorities who largely support the opposition CHP, face an increasingly uncertain political future.*
- *In remarks to an American journalist, Prime Minister Erdogan says the country will pursue extradition of Fethullah Gulen from the U.S.*

Soma mine disaster

Bodies are still being pulled from the mine near the town of Soma, with repercussions spreading across the country. Details continue to emerge from the disaster, but it is clear that the death toll will surpass the 1992 mine explosion that killed 263 miners.

As disheartening as the news has been, more puzzling has been the prime minister's reaction. Travelling to Soma while rescue operations were ongoing, Erdogan's presence caused a halt in rescue operations as his security entourage inspected the area. Families and co-workers of those trapped underground reacted angrily to the temporary stoppage caused by security precautions for the country's top leader.

In an incredibly callous remark during a press conference about the situation, Erdogan appeared to offer little sympathy over the matter. Instead, he attempted to downplay the Soma disaster in the context of the mining sector's history.

"Explosions like this in these mines happen all the time. It's not like these don't happen elsewhere in the world," said the prime minister as he then listed off a number of mining disasters going back to Victorian England.

Erdogan and his entourage were later caught up in a protest in Soma. Protesters shouted at the prime minister and his security team. Erdogan was forced to duck into a supermarket, where a local MHP deputy is now alleging that the prime minister punched a protester who shouted at him.

Photos have also emerged of the prime minister's deputy chief of staff kicking a protester who was restrained on the ground by two soldiers. Though he later stated that he was saddened by his actions, the deputy chief of staff justified his actions by saying he had endured verbal abuse throughout the day.

Working conditions in mines, as well as other sectors in Turkey, are often dangerous. While the AKP touts its economic bona fides after more than a decade in power, its oversight of working conditions in a privately run firm such as Soma Holding is thought to be minimal. The situation in Soma is even more damning for the prime minister because just last month his government vetoed calls by a CHP deputy for an inquiry into the mine's safety.

Erdogan's habit of brooking no criticism plays well in many situations, but this is certainly not one of them. Flippantly mentioning that mining is a dangerous profession is no way to soothe a nation in mourning. Stoicism in the face of criticism would have been a better approach to the entire matter. Yet Erdogan increasingly appears to suffer from the same debilitating problem that long-tenured leaders often face: he is out of touch. By not giving regard to the emotions at play in Soma, whose province voted for the nationalist MHP in the recent elections, the prime minister appears to have added the mourners to his long list of enemies.

These were not young, liberal protesters in Gezi Park or Kurdish supporters of the outlawed PKK. The protesters whose mourning the prime minister dismissed as a consequence of a day's work are like many of the compatriots around the country: middle aged, hardworking and stunned at the scale of the disaster.

Turkish voters of all stripes witnessed how the prime minister views anyone who disagrees with him. It is a staggering reaction to the country's worst mining disaster, which could have dire repercussions for his personal ambition to run as the nation's first publicly elected president in August.

Domestic politics

On May Day, protesters who were told that they would not be allowed in Gezi Park vowed to take the public space back in spite of guaranteed police presence. In large part, the protestors failed. Though spurred on by labour unions hoping to recapture the incensed mood of last summer's demonstrations, the few thousand protesters who attempted to breach the police perimeter ended up in small, running street battles rather than entering Gezi Park itself. The 2013 protests it was not.

It was always a long shot for the beleaguered opposition movement, which continues to be united in one thing only: distaste for the prime minister. Yet there is no central figure for those opposed to the ruling party and Prime Minister Tayip Erdogan to coalesce around. Part of this is due to the generally weak candidates fielded by the organized political opposition. Leaders of the MHP and CHP, while important to their direct constituencies, have little appeal outside of their parties. The Kurdish BDP forever sits in the shadow of imprisoned PKK-leader Abdullah Ocalan, who has maintained a détente with the government for more than a year. The field has been left to Erdogan, and Erdogan alone. It is telling that the second most popular figure in Turkey is President Abdullah Gul.

On occasion, hope does arise for those in the anti-AKP camp. Most recently it was in the form of the nation's top judicial figure, Hasim Kilic. An AKP-appointed judge, Kilic's condemnation of the prime minister and the ruling party seemingly came out of nowhere. Besides being an AKP appointment, Kilic was believed to have been favourable to the party, having kept it from being banned in 2008.

Yet in an astounding speech delivered while the prime minister sat stone faced just a few meters away, Kilic laid into recent attacks on the country's courts and judges.

"To say that the Constitutional Court acts with a political agenda or to blame it for not being patriotic is shallow criticism…It is striking that a constitutional ruling has been criticized excessively with political worries". ("Turkish judge defies Erdogan with attack on 'dire' allegations," Today's Zaman, 25 April 2014.)

In all, it was an astounding retort from the court's highest official. Democratic institutions work because of separation of powers between branches of the state or government. While those institutions may not agree with each others' decisions, it is paramount that they at least respect them. In light of recent court decisions and prosecutorial campaigns against him and his inner circle, Erdogan publicly rounded on the Turkish courts following the court's overturning of a government ban on the social media site Twitter.

The prime minister called the judiciary a "parallel state", knowing full well that such polemic terminology draws direct comparisons to military coups that haunt the Republic's past. While he seems justified in disagreeing with the rulings, making such accusations against the courts appears excessive.

Kilic is equally guilty of politicizing the issue further in his remarks. A judge openly rebuking an elected politician in this manner can have questionable repercussions. Yet the response is understandable, especially when viewed in the context of the judge's closing term in office, which is set to expire before the year is out. Can Kilic be the figure the fractious opposition parties need to counter the ever formidable AKP? His reputation was stellar in most circles before the current dispute, but now the AKP's sights are on him.

Crimea

The fate of the Crimean Tatars, whose cultural and historical ties with Turkey go back centuries, has been effectively sealed in light of the March 16 referendum. That vote, which the peninsula's 300,000 Tatars boycotted en masse, has seen the population become increasingly isolated in the break-away region. Though Crimea has failed to secure international recognition of joining with Russia, in practical terms, the peninsula is no longer Ukrainian.

The Tatars' reticence in joining Russia has drawn the ire of pro-Moscow groups. That stance is now costing them, with the anticipated reprisals coming by way of official and unofficial means. Communities and organizations face ongoing harassment and attacks, like the 23 April attack on the Mejlis, the Tatars' legislative body. Masked militiamen stormed the Mejlis parliamentary building and forcibly tore down a flag pole that had been flying the Ukrainian flag.

The highest ranking Crimean Tatar politician, Mustafa Abdulcemil Kirimoglu, has also faced persecution, despite having friends in high places. Kirimoglu met

with Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gul in Turkey, where the Turkish leaders assured him they would focus on the status of the Crimean Tatars in a diplomatic roadmap. He was also awarded the Order of the Republic Medal of Turkey by Gul. According to Today's Zaman, the award was "a symbolic gesture to demonstrate Turkey's deep commitment to the well-being of the Tatars." ("Crimean Tatar leader banned from Russia, including Crimea," Today's Zaman, 2 April 2014.)

Imagine Kirimoglu's surprise when he attempted to re-enter Crimea following the trip, only to be told he was denied entry into the Russian Federation for five years. Russia denies that the ban is in place, but the Tatar leader later said that border guards who barred him from entering Russian territory confirmed it.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made assurances that the Tatars' rights would be respected, and in late April signed a decree giving all Crimean residents the option to remain Ukrainian citizens. However, the banning of Kirimoglu and the actions of the newly created Crimean Republic are telling. On May 5, the region's public prosecutor accused Mejils' leaders of "illegal mass activities" and threatened to ban the body and its representatives outright if they did not cease their actions.

The general nature of the accusations leaves Tatar leaders at an impasse. Turkish leaders find themselves in a similar position. Despite lip service to the contrary, Ankara has little leverage in Crimea.

Turkey's most forceful reaction following Kirimoglu's ban was to condemn the action. Yet while Turkey's economic growth relies on substantial imports of Russian energy, 58 percent of gas in 2011 alone, the fate of the Tatars seems to remain beyond the boundaries of the Turkish regional agenda.

The Alevis and Alawites

Though the country's Kurdish minority will likely be the focus of AKP politicians in the months ahead of the August presidential election, two other minority groups face a grim political future.

The Alevi and Alawite minorities are distinctly separate groups, yet often share the same fate in Turkish politics. The former make up around 15 percent of the country's population, and for all intents and purposes are closer to the mystical Sufi school of Islam than any other. The Alawites, numbering around one million individuals, have an increasingly relevant role since the Syrian Civil War began. Turkey's Alawites belong to the same sect as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose forces – allied with Lebanon's Hamas and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard – are aligned against a largely Sunni rebellion.

In either case, both align themselves with the secular Republican People's Party, the largest opposition bloc in the country. Their support for the party and its policies is clear, as a secular republic is more likely to protect them in Sunni-majority Turkey than the Islamist AKP. That support has cost them dearly, however.

Shrewd AKP politicians have solidified their party's standing amongst the country's more pious and culturally conservative voters, who are in large part Sunni. Rhetoric by AKP politicians over the years has been pointedly critical of CHP members who are also religious minorities, most notably CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, an Alevi.

Both groups also face religious discrimination from the government's Directorate for Religious Affairs, which controls the state-mandated religious education courses taught in Turkish schools. Somewhat representative of the country's large Sunni population, the courses largely focus on that sect of Islam, while making minor mentions to Alevi schools of thought. However, while the AKP government has made an effort to return former churches and synagogues to religious groups, including paying for upkeep on the structures, Alevi houses of worship are ignored.

Now, entering the second decade of AKP control of the country's highest office, many younger members of these groups are pursuing different means of confronting the government. They were heavily

involved in clashes across Turkey's major metropolitan areas in the Taksim Square protests against the ruling party in the summer of 2013. It is telling that of those killed in the protests, stemming back to last summer, all were either Alevi or Alawite.

There have been comparisons of these increasingly alienated groups and the Kurdish minority prior to the 1980s rise of the PKK, though for now the situations hardly resemble one another. Turkey's Kurds were for all intents and purposes second class citizens in their own country, and faced state-sanctioned violence. While the deaths of those Alevi and Alawite protesters is certainly a tragedy, deaths in the midst of riots and street fights hardly compare to state-sanctioned repression.

That said, if members of these groups continue to feel alienated, they may begin to look outside of the political arena for a solution to their grievances. One practical way to alleviate these tensions would be for AKP politicians, the prime minister included, to cease characterisations of Alevi and Alawites as "others." In a religiously conservative nation like Turkey, those allusions and accusations have an effect.

The Directorate for Religious Affairs, which is under control of the prime minister's office, could perhaps do more in respecting the places of worship of the country's second largest religious group. In ignoring the religious significance of the Alevi cemevis, the prime minister offers clear insight into his true view of freedom of religion. Though a vocal proponent of religious expression in the public sphere after decades of reactionary Kemalism, Erdogan has been less vocal in advocating for the same rights for Turkey's Muslim minorities.

Again, comparisons to the country's Kurds in the late 1970s and early 1980s are a stretch, but the example is relevant in one regard. Though political differences are unavoidable, harping on religious and ethnic schisms serves no one but those pandering to their base. Abdullah Ocalan was not born with a rifle in his hands, but rather took up arms after finding no room for political activism and his Kurdish identity.

Some benchmarks of 'a country's freedom' are measured not by how the majority treats itself, but rather how they treat their minorities. The AKP strode to victory promising to fulfil the idea of religious tolerance after enduring its own hardships at the hand of a reactionary secular state. With more than 10 years having passed by, is it not time to fulfil that promise for all citizens?

Fethullah Gulen

In a late-April interview with American journalist Charlie Rose, Prime Minister Erdogan expounded on the rift between the Hizmet Movement and his ruling AKP government. The prime minister warned that Gulen was not only a threat to Turkey, but also to the United States, where he has lived in self-imposed exile since 1999.

"These elements which threaten the national security of Turkey cannot be allowed to exist in other countries because what they do to us here, they might do against their host," Erdogan said.

The following day, the government said it would begin the extradition process against the Pennsylvania-based cleric for building up a parallel state and instigating a graft probe in late December. That probe, undertaken by the police and prosecutorial offices, caused three ministers to resign and reached as high as Erdogan's own son.

The U.S. has been quiet on the matter, but any extradition request must follow a conviction in Turkish court with evidence. The guidelines for extradition between Turkey and the U.S., set out in a 1979 treaty, also rule out extradition for political purposes unless the actions target the head of state or their families. (Solaker, "Turkey's Erdogan calls on U.S. to extradite rival Gulen," Reuters, 29 April 2014.)

The Turkish government's recent history of sealing court cases with trumped-up evidence does not lend much hope to its cause of convicting Gulen, and even less so in the eyes of American leaders. In any event, the U.S. is unlikely to hand over Gulen.

Relations remain cool between the U.S. and Turkey, with Washington still irritated by the AKP's turn to a Chinese-made missile defence system, while Erdogan's habit of talking loudly and carrying a big stick has irritated the Obama administration over the past six years. Washington has little inclination to do any favours for Turkey's ruling party at this point, meaning that unless some truly damning and legitimate evidence is produced by Turkish prosecutors, Gulen will be in Pennsylvania for a long time to come.

EGF Turkey File
Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Copyright European Geopolitical Forum SPRL
Director and Founder: Dr Marat Terterov
Email: Marat.Terterov@gpf-europe.com

Avenue Du Manoir D'Anjou 8
Brussels 1150 Belgium
Tel/Fax: + 32496 45 40 49
info@gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.com
www.gpf-europe.ru