

The
Economist

Turkey's prime minister

Of generals, judges and presidents

Recep Tayyip Erdogan seeks backing from all quarters for his presidential bid

Jun 28th 2014 | ANKARA | From the print edition

THAT long-awaited “we told you so” moment arrived on June 18th for Dani Rodrik, an economist at Princeton University, and his wife Pinar Dogan. An Istanbul



In celebration of liberty

court ordered the release of 230 people, mostly army officers convicted of trying to overthrow the prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his Justice and Development (AK) government. Among them was Cetin Dogan, a retired general and Mr Rodrik's father-in-law, sentenced in the “Sledgehammer” case.

Mr Rodrik and his wife have campaigned hard to prove that much of the case, in which the generals supposedly planned to bomb mosques during Friday prayers and shoot down Greek fighters to justify a coup, rested on bogus digital evidence. Forensic experts concurred, in 25 separate reports. The constitutional court duly called for a retrial because the prosecution's case was flawed and key defence witnesses were not allowed to testify, and the Istanbul court released the suspects.

Coincidentally on the same day, an Ankara court sentenced Kenan Evren, a 96-year-old general and former president who led a violent coup in 1980, to life imprisonment. The same verdict was handed down to Tahsin Sahinkaya, the other surviving coup plotter. Thus a gross injustice was righted and a long-overdue punishment meted out. General Dogan celebrated. But, as Mr Rodrik tweeted, Mr Erdogan seems in effect to be saying “I can put you in jail and I can let you out. This is democracy.” Many believe that, just as the Sledgehammer convictions were political, so was the constitutional court's call for a retrial.

The first was about settling scores with the generals; the second, as an AK official says, was

“about poking Fethullah Gulen in the eye.” He is referring to the Pennsylvania-based Sunni cleric, an ally in the battle against the army who has since fallen out with the prime minister. Mr Erdogan now calls Mr Gulen and his flock “terrorists”. Judges and prosecutors involved in the Sledgehammer case, and the similar Ergenekon trials, have been purged or demoted, along with thousands of bureaucrats and security officials seen as Gulenists. Mr Erdogan has gone global, getting Azerbaijan to shut Gulenist schools and even asking America to extradite Mr Gulen.

Mr Erdogan's courtship of the army (and of the Kurds) also furthers his hopes of becoming Turkey's first popularly elected president in August. The army was plotting coups as recently as 2007 when, in a statement on its website, it threatened to intervene over the presidency. If Mr Erdogan really wanted to bolster civilian control of the army, he would get the chief of the general staff to report to the defence minister, have the army's books audited and change the constitution the army wrote in 1982.

Rumblings of discontent are growing within Islamic intellectual circles. Corruption allegations against Mr Erdogan's relatives, business cronies and fellow AK members suggest they are no different from their secular rivals, some say. Many are horrified by a claim by Hayrettin Karaman, an Islamic academic, in the daily *Yeni Safak*, an AK party mouthpiece, that it is admissible for businessmen to be “asked” to donate a portion of their profit from government contracts to charitable foundations. Mr Erdogan's younger son Bilal runs a charitable foundation referred to in the scandal, though he denies wrongdoing.

Liberals who were among Mr Erdogan's staunchest supporters are also disillusioned. Anti-government journalists continue to be sacked at his behest. Prosecutors want a long jail sentence for a 13-year-old boy accused of taking part in a protest against the deaths of 300 people in the Soma mine explosion in May. This week Turkey's central bank unexpectedly cut interest rates by 0.75 percentage points, seemingly to please Mr Erdogan and despite its supposedly independent status.

General Evren's conviction is a milestone. Yet a huge majority of Turks welcomed his 1980 coup, because it ended street battles between left-wing and right-wing activists that were claiming thousands of lives. Today's Turkey is richer and a lot calmer. But as Mr Erdogan looks ahead to the presidential race, he might do well to remember that the greatest leaders have worked with critics and opponents as well as their natural base of support.

From the print edition: Europe