

The 'doctored evidence' at heart of case against generals accused of plotting coup



A woman protests against the trial of two Turkish generals. The balloon shows Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk

Turkey Alexander Christie-Miller Istanbul
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Doctored evidence lies at the heart of a mass trial credited with breaking the power of Turkey's military, documents seen by The Times suggest.

Material relating to an alleged 2003 coup plot, as a result of which 195 officers from Nato's second-largest army are being prosecuted, show glaring inconsistencies, suggesting that some suspects may have been framed.

One document detailing the coup plans and dated December 2002 refers to an NGO, the Turkish Youth Union, which was not founded until 2006.

The coup's alleged ringleader, General Cetin Dogan, whose typed but unsigned name appears at the bottom of the plan, had retired three years earlier.

Other evidence contains references to hospitals, institutions, and a Nato base that did not exist at the time the CD on which they were discovered was supposedly created. A forensic examiner's report concluded that it was "highly probable" that a suspect's handwriting on the CD was mechanically forged by copying characters from a diary entry.

At the weekend, the leader of Turkey's main opposition party, Kemal Kiliçdaroglu, voiced suspicions about the plot. "We are looking for cases with concrete evidence," he told a Turkish newspaper. "But the 2003 coup attempt case has documents and files that don't coincide with other file dates."

In another instance, an officer proved he was at a defence college in Britain when the plans suggest he was filing coup documents in Turkey.

Last month, the country's military top brass resigned, signalling the end of a power struggle with the Islamist aligned Government. Isik Kosaner, the Chief of General Staff, requested early retirement along with chiefs of the army, navy and air force, and protested about the imprisonment of 250 serving and retired officers implicated in the coup plot and other matters under investigation.

"It is impossible to accept that these detentions are based on any universal laws, justice, or rules of conscience," he said in a parting statement.

The departure of the top brass was hailed as an historic victory for a country blighted by decades of military coup d'etats, but now proffered as a role model for the Middle East.

But some allege that the coup plot was entirely fabricated. "Either the people who wrote the plan had a time machine, or else it's a fabrication," said Gareth Jenkins, a senior fellow at the Central Asia Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

"I don't think there's any doubt that the motivation is to try to discredit the military as an institution, partly because it's seen as a rival centre of power, and partly as revenge because it has persecuted Islamists in the past."

The alleged plot surfaced in February 2010, after the Taraf newspaper was handed a suitcase of files, CDs and voice recordings. They had been supposedly drawn up by members of Turkey's staunchly secular military soon after the Justice and Development Party, which has roots in a banned Islamist movement, won power in 2002. Though inconsistencies in the plot emerged soon after its discovery, the details have attracted little attention due to what some claim is a climate of fear.

In March, Ahmet Sik and Nedim Sener, two investigative journalists who had been writing about judicial and police corruption, were arrested as part of an anti-terror investigation. "It's sad that we now have a media environment in which no one wants to touch this stuff," said Asli Aydintasbas, a columnist at Milliyet. "I don't want to touch it any more, because who knows that I won't be included in the next round-up?" But the

investigation into the alleged coup plot has many defenders. This is partly because the military has toppled four elected governments since 1960 and has, at times, brutalised its own people in its role as self-appointed guardian of the secular political system created by Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

"This trial is extremely important to clean the military of officers who have been involved in undermining the democratic regime in this country," said Sahin Alpay, a columnist.

Defenders of the trial explain the evidence inconsistencies by claiming that the plotters were still updating the coup plans in 2009. However, they have failed to explain why the creation dates on files and CDs were faked to make it appear that the plans dated from 2003. Mr Jenkins believes that this was done to tie in with another key piece of evidence, the recording of a military seminar in March 2003. Suspects are heard discussing detailed plans to suppress an Islamist uprising. Prosecutors claim they were rehearsing plans for a coup, but those involved say it was a "war game scenario". 'Either the planners had a time machine, or else it's a fabrication'



A system so poisoned that facts carry little currency

Alexander Christie-Miller Commentary

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It is not surprising that a smell of corruption should hang over one of the most important trials in Turkish history. For decades the country's court system has been used as a weapon of the Establishment to bludgeon its perceived enemies.

For many, it is poetic justice that a military that long wielded that weapon is now falling victim to it. It was, after all, the army that oversaw the show trial and execution in 1961 of Adnan Menderes, Turkey's first democratically elected Prime Minister. But the Sledgehammer case is significant not only for the 195 soldiers on trial.

The investigation into the alleged coup plot has played an important role in the Islamist-rooted Government's victory in its long power struggle with the army.

The generals have cast a shadow over the country's politics since the soldier-statesman Mustafa Kemal Ataturk founded modern Turkey in 1923. Their ousting from the political sphere has been widely celebrated as a milestone in Turkish democracy.

However, worrying signs of judicial and police corruption, as well as the persecution of those who seek to highlight it, puts this in doubt. There are also fears surrounding what

many regard as the growing authoritarianism of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Prime Minister.

Despite EU-backed constitutional amendments last year, which some fear have handed his party control of the justice system, there is little talk of root and branch reform.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people, including journalists and academics, have been imprisoned as part of another sprawling investigation into an alleged criminal network. Critics claim that it is stifling dissent.

Perhaps most depressingly, the fabrications in the Sledgehammer case reveal the rampant culture of disinformation that has poisoned Turkish public discourse for decades. Facts are so willingly faked that they carry little currency.

Army officers may well have been planning a coup in 2003 but, thanks to doctored evidence, we may never know for sure. The defendants will likely remain for ever guilty to their enemies, and for ever innocent in the eyes of their defenders.