

International

A long simmering Erdogan-Gul feud erupts into acrimonious public row

Gul 'could emerge as presidential candidate' in 2019 elections

ISTANBUL: A long simmering feud between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his predecessor and one-time comrade Abdullah Gul has erupted into an acrimonious public row, raising questions about the former head of state's future political intentions. Gul and Erdogan co-founded the ruling Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) that dominated Turkish politics since 2002, with Gul serving as premier, foreign minister and then president from 2007-2014.

Since leaving office, Gul kept a guarded silence as Erdogan moved to expand the powers of the presidency as rumors swirled the former president was alarmed over Turkey's course and bitterly resented being excluded from the ruling party. Gul was said to be particularly unhappy over an April referendum Erdogan called and narrowly won to expand the powers of the presidency. But an emergency decree issued last month which says civilians would not face legal action over any behavior in thwarting the 2016 coup sparked fears of mob rule and a rare intervention from Gul.

Gul labeled the decree "worrysome in terms of the understanding of the rule of law" and risked "developments in the future that would upset us all." Erdogan, without naming Gul, spat back those worried about the decree were no different from people who turned down the constitutional changes in the April referendum.

'Express my opinion'

Abdulkadir Selvi, pro-Erdogan columnist in the Hurriyet newspaper, added fuel to the flames saying talk was growing that Gul could emerge as a presidential candidate of the

Turkish opposition to challenge Erdogan in 2019 elections. He said that Erdogan had already "seen the plot" and the row over the immunity decree was "only tip of an iceberg". Gul then hit back at criticism from "some MPs and trolls", saying that they "exceeded the limits of morality." "As a person who believes in freedom of thought and expression, one of the founding principles of our party, I will continue to express my opinion on occasions I deem necessary." The nationalist Aydinlik newspaper added that Gul had been engaged in "election traffic" with an intensive travel schedule that included trips to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Britain as well as keeping in close touch with ex-premier Ahmet Davutoglu who was ousted in 2016.

Gul kept a guarded silence as Erdogan moved to expand his powers



'A little bit braver'

Analysts say that the current row represented a new step by Gul, a hugely prudent figure who has so far kept any criticism of his former ally deeply private. But it would also be premature to assume Gul was throwing down a gauntlet to Erdogan ahead of the 2019 elections that could ultimately result in a ballot box showdown. "Despite the rifts that emerged between the two from time to time, they have never been rivals," pollster Adil Gur, who runs A&G Research said.

"I believe Gul will not run as candidate and even if he does, I don't think he will have any chance," Gur said. The dispute likely first erupted in May-June 2013 when Erdogan refused any compromise faced with unprecedented anti-government protests whereas Gul advocated a more conciliatory approach. The referendum appears to have been a breaking point, with Gul reportedly refusing to back the presidential system plan in a tense hours-long meeting with Erdogan



ISTANBUL: File photo shows Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) talking with Turkish President Abdullah Gul during the opening ceremony of the third Bosphorus bridge in Istanbul. —AFP

ahead of the poll. Gareth Jenkins, Istanbul-based non-resident senior research fellow at the Silk Road Studies Program, said Gul's best chance of returning to frontline politics would be within the AKP in the event of an anti-Erdogan rebellion in the party. He said that to mount any serious challenge Gul would have to regain the trust of Erdogan opponents lost due

to his prolonged silence on key issues and reluctance for public confrontation. "He would have to make a lot of sacrifices and prepared to take risks before anybody takes him seriously as an opponent," Jenkins said. But he acknowledged that nonetheless Gul was "a little bit braver" in the last week compared with the past.—AFP

The factions that will decide Iran's protest response

TEHRAN: Recent unrest has highlighted the deep-seated frustration felt by many Iranians over the economy and their demands for reform, and attention now turns to how the political establishment will respond. Often seen in monolithic terms outside the country, Iran's politicians are vetted by a conservative-dominated Guardian Council to ensure they are loyal to the Islamic revolution, and ultimate power rests with supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But there are still deep divisions over how the country should move forward politically, socially and economically. While all groups opposed the recent unrest and accepted action was needed to address economic problems, five key factions are pulling in different directions on how best to reform the country.

The moderates

The moderate faction currently dominates Iranian politics, focusing on better management of the economy, rebuilding trade with the West and gradually improving civil liberties as the best way to preserve the Islamic revolution. Rouhani has been accused of pushing austerity and neoliberal economic policies at the expense of the poor. He has called for more time for the benefits to trickle down and remains popular with many middle class voters for his efforts to challenge unaccountable parts of the establishment. Like his mentor, the arch-pragmatist Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who died in January 2017, he has shown his capacity to switch direction and has accepted that more needs to be done to protect poorer sections of society. Analysts say the protests could provide him with an opportunity to push for more radical reforms.

Reformists of ex-president

Despite being barred from public appearances over his role in 2009 protests, Khatami remains one of the most popular figures in Iranian politics. His endorsement was seen as crucial to Rouhani's election in 2013 and 2017. The reformist faction includes some 20 parties pushing for greater freedoms, gender equality and worker rights. Most of their legislation was blocked by the Guardian Council during Khatami's 1997-2005 tenure, and they were decimated by the crackdown on pro-reformist demonstrations



QOM, Iran: Tourists and clerics walk near the Massoumeh shrine in the holy city of Qom, 130 kilometers south of Tehran. —AFP

in 2009. However, their alliance with the moderates has seen reformists return to the corridors of power, and they hold influential positions in Rouhani's cabinet.

Conservatives and hardliners

A broad range of conservative parties strongly oppose efforts to liberalize society and remain deeply suspicious of rapprochement with the West. They are pushing hard for a more self-subsistent "resistance economy" as directed by Khamenei. Having been hurt by divisions in recent elections, they succeeded in rallying behind a single candidate in May's election-hardline cleric Ebrahim Raisi, who took almost 16 million votes to Rouhani's 24 million. They have gained considerable traction by criticizing Rouhani's economic reforms and the failure to support the poor, particularly cuts to welfare and subsidies, and the unrest could bolster their position. However, reformists accuse them of threatening the regime as a whole by encouraging the initial protests against Rouhani.

Moderate conservatives

Parliament speaker Larijani and his allies control the main parliamentary commissions and will be crucial to the passage of eventual reforms. They have largely supported Rouhani's economic reforms and the nuclear deal with world powers. However, the faction is less favorable to Rouhani's efforts to liberalise society and opposes the president's criticisms of other parts of the establishment. Larijani has also been a strong advocate of the "resistance economy".

Ex-president Ahmadinejad

Ahmadinejad remains widely popular, particularly among poorer segments of society who recall his large-scale welfare schemes. However, he has been increasingly ostracized by the political establishment. He was barred from running in last year's election and his protege Hamid Baghaie was last month sentenced to 15 years in prison for corruption. —AFP

In DR Congo, flood tragedy highlights perils of urban sprawl

KINSHASA: The morning light showed a scene of desolation as people in Ngaliema surveyed the wreckage of shanty homes swept away by killer floods and landslides. Among the 44 people who perished overnight Wednesday in Kinshasa, the capital of Democratic Republic of Congo, were a teenager, Brunelle, her sister Gladys, and Gladys' baby. Their home of makeshift yellowish clay bricks, located at the foot of a steep slope literally dissolved after the waters struck, neighbors said.

"The emergency services came, but they arrived late, around 4:00 am," said a young man, Magloire, who said that he was the one who found the bodies. The disaster was one that could have been avoided—the rainfall was indeed torrential but not exceptional, given this city's location in the heart of central tropical Africa. But mass fatalities were sadly predictable, given the triple contribution of poverty, uncontrolled development and over-population. Homes

made of flimsy materials had been built illegally and without foundations in a place vulnerable to floods.

"This is uncontrolled building," said Ruffin Abedi, deputy chief of Ngaliema district. "The regulations have stipulated for years that people shouldn't live there. But people settle there anyway, because they don't have the money to go elsewhere." A Chinese company had been contracted to install drainage on a road at the top of the slope, but the pipes were swept away by the rain, and lay among debris at the bottom, near a sofa—the only visible sign of a home that once stood there.

Chaotic city

"The solution is to move people who live in flood-prone areas to places which are habitable," said Roger-Nestor Lubiku, former director-general of the Congo Geographic Institute (IGC). Such things are easier said than done, in a city whose population size is little more than a good guess, and which lacks an accurate land registry. A common estimate is that the DRC capital has 10 million inhabitants, amounting to a rough doubling over less than 20 years, and accounting for possibly a seventh of the national population.

Between 2000 and 2005 alone, the population rose from six million to 7.5 million, according to satellite pictures. A 2009 study in the Belgian Review of



KINSHASA: A child walks past and a woman standing among the remains of a landslide in Ngaliema district in Kinshasa. Thirty-seven people died overnight when torrential rain and mudslides swept through shanty homes in Kinshasa. —AFP

Cartography-Belgium, the former colonial power, retains close ties with the DRC—found that 30 percent of urban development had taken place on steep slopes with an incline of 15 percent, or more than one in seven. "These present a significant risk of erosion," it warned presciently. Three-quarters of homes in Kinshasa

are slums which have no access to sanitation or electricity, Corneille Kanene, former head of UN-Habitat, said last year. The opposition blames the problem on poor governance and the flaws of the state. The proximity of these slums to wealthy areas is also a shock, and a reminder of DRC's deep inequalities.—AFP

In Trump-Bannon feud, Republicans see silver lining

WASHINGTON: In the white-hot battle for influence in US politics the Republican establishment has regained the upper hand, after Donald Trump unleashed a scalding repudiation of Steve Bannon, self-proclaimed champion of the anti-Washington populism that swept the president to power. Traditional conservatives and rabble-rousing populists have long competed for the ear of the president, who appeared to revel in casting the rival forces off one another. More often than not Trump has aligned with the Republican leaders in Congress, an arranged marriage of sorts.

But for months the president also let firebrand Bannon, as his top aide in the White House, conduct open war against what he calls the Washington "swamp" including party leaders, incumbent lawmakers and other heavyweights—all of whom, according to Bannon, undermine Trump's populist revolution. Now the man who cast himself as supreme defender of Trumpism stands well outside the ring of power, banished by the president and rejected by his most prominent donors. Bannon emerged from relative obscurity when Trump picked him as campaign chief in August 2016, just three months from the presidential election. At the time, he was running Breitbart.com, a conservative website that provided boisterous coverage of Trump's rise.

Bloomberg had called him "the most dangerous political operative in America." Soon Bannon presided over the brand of economic populism promoted by Trump, and while the president always contested descriptions that he was under Bannon's influence, he nevertheless hired him as chief strategist. After several hectic months, Bannon exited the White House, although the two men had apparently remained on good terms. Bannon returned to Breitbart and control of his media "weapons." His goal: help defeat establishment Republicans in 2018's congressional primaries and eventually bring down Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, an arch-nemesis.

But the first candidate under his wing, Roy Moore of Alabama, did something the conservative state had not seen in 25 years: lose to a Democrat. The defeat was a stinging blow to Bannon's reputation.—AFP

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