

Sledgehammer hits the Army

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Turkish security forces have recently arrested almost 50 people as a result of revelations about an alleged plan, codenamed "Sledgehammer", for a coup against the ruling AK party in 2003. Amongst those detained were the former heads of the Navy and Air Force, 15 ex-Generals and 32 incumbent officers. Last year another sweep rounded up over 200 people, including military personnel, lawyers, journalists and politicians in the Ergenekon conspiracy, also aimed against the AKP. The prominence of the people arrested and the scale of the operations reveals just how hard the fight between the secularists (who regard themselves as the preservers of the "legacy of Ataturk") and the more populist and Islamic leaning ruling power is.

The Armed Forces in Turkey have long been regarded by both Turkey's NATO allies and by the "man-in-the-street" as a much safer pair of hands than politicians, and especially Islamic-leaning politicians. This time around the previously all-powerful military machine has not felt able to stop the investigations and arrests. The current Chief of Staff, Ilker Basbug, said in a recent interview: "Turkey has definitely lived through certain events since the 1960s; however, we tend to view these as passé. We believe our citizens need peace and quiet. Political power changes hands through elections, through democratic means". This sort of comment illustrates the shift in power away from the military; a coup is a remote possibility now and the military are slowly and painfully coming to terms with the fact that they no longer have veto power over the Government in Turkey.

This does not however, mark the end of the fight between the secularists and the Government. The battleground is now the courts, where another attempt to ban the AKP is possible. Even if this does not happen, the AKP may well try to change the Constitution to reduce the power of non-military secularists. Either way, the message is the same: the fight between secularists and Islam in Turkey is nasty, and getting nastier, but is still – just – civilised and controlled.