

Turkish paper sues Erdogan in 'treason' row

ANKARA, TURKEY: A Turkish newspaper said Monday it plans to sue Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a "treason" row that has highlighted political tensions in the country.



Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
Erdogan is seen by critics as
an increasingly divisive and
authoritarian figure. (Image:
Wikimedia Commons)

The government lodged a criminal complaint against the liberal Taraf newspaper last month after it revealed documents purporting to detail secret plans by the Turkish strongman to eliminate a powerful religious movement.

Erdogan accused the reporter of leaking state documents and of being a "traitor" -- prompting the paper to respond with a lawsuit of its own.

The tit-for-tat legal moves further ratchet up tensions in Turkey ahead of a series of elections next year and against the backdrop of renewed membership talks with the European Union.

Erdogan called at the weekend on the judiciary to "do its duty" against Taraf, which had published what it said was an action plan by the prime minister to wipe out a network run by influential exiled Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen.

"Revealing state secrets cannot be considered freedom of expression, it is quite simply treason," he said, describing reporter Mehmet Baransu as a "traitor".

"We are going to lodge a complaint in the next few days over these defamatory statements and for seeking to influence the judiciary," Taraf lawyer Veysel Ak told AFP on Monday.

The feud between Erdogan and Gulen has exposed fractures in the prime minister's religiously conservative power base

and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Show of strength?

Their dispute hit the headlines last month over a bid by Erdogan's government to close a network of private schools run by Gulen's Hizmet (Service) movement.

Observers say the move is a show of strength by Erdogan ahead of the local elections in March, a presidential ballot in August, and parliamentary polls in 2015.

Erdogan is seen by critics as an increasingly divisive and authoritarian figure, particularly among secularists opposed to his efforts to impose conservative Islamic values on society.

Gulen has been living in exile in the United States since 1999 to escape charges of plotting against the secular state in Turkey, but remains an influential figure in several arms of the state apparatus including the police and judiciary.

Signs of discord between Gulen and Erdogan had already emerged in 2012 over the role of Turkey's spy chief Hakan Fiden and relations deteriorated during the nationwide anti-government unrest in June.

The demonstrations dealt a sharp body blow to Erdogan's image and provoked international concern about the heavy-handed police response and a crackdown on protesters and their sympathisers including intellectuals and journalists.

The EU resumed membership talks with Turkey after being stalled for three years over several issues including its human rights record, its predominantly Muslim population, a territorial dispute with Cyprus and opposition from major powers France and Germany.

Last month Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muiznieks, voiced deep concern about the state of media freedom in the country.

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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