

WEDNESDAY, 02 APRIL 2014

# Turkey's Gülen Controversy Spills over to Azerbaijan

Published in [Field Reports](#)

By Mina Muradova (04/02/2014 issue of the CACI Analyst)

The conflict between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Islamic Hizmet movement's leader Fethullah Gülen has spread to Azerbaijan. A scandal erupted in Turkey in December 2013, when police arrested 52 suspects on various corruption charges, including the sons of three government ministers and the general manager of the state-owned Halkbank. The operation detained people close to the Turkish Prime Minister.

Erdogan termed it a plot by the Hizmet movement and its exiled leader Gülen to overthrow the government. It was considered a response to the government's decision last November to close in 2015 the dersane, a network of private tutoring centers, most of which are run by the Gülen movement. Educational centers reportedly provide enormous financial resources to the group but also help it recruit new members and allies in government.

In late February, both government and opposition media reported that a similar "parallel structure" existed in Azerbaijan. The diplomatic missions of both countries reportedly provided the government with a list of local Gülen followers. In early March, emails showing ties between Azerbaijani officials and Gülen were leaked to the media. One of them was related to Elnur Aslanov, an official of President Ilham Aliyev's Administration. "The Turkish government is concerned that the Hizmet movement is expanding in Azerbaijan through its wide network of educational establishments and businesses, as well as by placing figures loyal to the Hizmet movement in high-level posts in government," the *Musavat* daily reported on February 28.

In Azerbaijan, Gülenists have been presented as a moderate socio-religious movement, but indifferent to politics. Local authorities had concerns about this but tolerated the movement thanks to its high quality educational system, including 13 prep schools, 11 high schools, and the Qafqaz (Caucasus) University that were considered as the main part of the Hizmet Movement. In 1992, Azerbaijan became the first country outside of Turkey where the movement opened its schools. Last year, the education institutions were transferred to the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan, but preserved curriculum, management and teacher staff with no changes.

Most people cannot afford to pay the fees, so it is mainly the children of businessmen and the elite who go there. This raises suspicions that the schools are raising a new "golden" generation with Gülen's values.

In early March, the names of officials linked with Gülen started appearing in the media. The news portal Minval called Aslanov a "patron of the Azerbaijani branch of Gülen followers."

In an interview with APA News Agency on March 1, Aslanov said that "slanders against me and a number of senior officials, who are always committed to the statehood course of the national leader Heydar Aliyev and loyal to President Ilham Aliyev, the attempts to link us with Nurcular sect are the results of deformed imagination and groundless." Aslanov stated that the period of "political myths" ended in Azerbaijan long ago, and that society is able to differentiate between tales and reality.

Aslanov was sacked on March 17 after a decision by President Aliyev, but the document did not name a reason for his dismissal. He headed the political analysis and information department in the President's administration since 2007, and is the son of Rabiyyat Aslanova, a ruling party MP, and reportedly has ties to the influential "grey cardinal" Ramiz Mekhtiyev, head of the President's Administration. He was responsible for supervising the Center for Strategic Studies, some leading pro-governmental media outlets, and the pro-governmental youth organization Ireli. Two days later, Aslanov's department was closed and merged with the Department of public-political issues.

Some media reports have termed the developments Ali Hasanov's victory over political rivals. Before

Aslanov's dismissal, Ali Hasanov, who heads the Department for public-political issues in the presidential office, called for public vigilance. At a religious affairs conference in Baku on March 7, he stated that some religious movements and missionary organizations are trying to establish themselves in Azerbaijan and to create an extensive network in order to realize their interests. Hasanov said that "the representatives of those trends should know that attempts to adapt the state policy to their interests will fail."

The issue has become highly controversial in Azerbaijan. Some political observers noted that Aslanov and others implicated by the leaked emails probably had nothing to do with Gülen.

According to Arif Hajili, a high-ranking member of the opposition party Musavat, "if a letter addressed to Gülen is a reason for firing, it is very strange because before there were a lot of publications about governmental officials linked to Kurdish PKK that created problems in relations with Turkey, but no measures were taken. Here, a person was sacked just based on an email."

Arif Yunus, a political analyst and the author of a book on Islam in Azerbaijan, termed the email "rubbish" because it was written with several Turkish grammar mistakes as well as errors from a religious point of view. "I don't believe that Aslanov is a Nurchu (a Gülen follower). It is a result of razborka (battle in Russian slang). I mean it is a power struggle between groups inside the government ... It is impossible to trust letters fabricated in a computer. I can't say what is the reason for the struggle between Aslanov and Hasanov, but the campaign against the Gülen movement has been used for fighting against political rivals," Yunus said in an interview to Meydan TV.

---

Read 1596 times

