AN INTERVIEW WITH FETHULLAH GÜLEN
UMA ENTREVISTA COM FETHULLAH GÜLEN

Peter Demant[1]

Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Sunni spiritual leader who is since 1999 modestly living in self-imposed exile in the US, is today doubtless the world's second most influential living Turk - though probably not in any way he would ever have wished. Once initiator and leader of a vast, wealthy and extremely successful moderate Islamic movement, he is nowadays accused by Turkish president Tayyip Recep Erdogan of being a conspirer and the mastermind behind the failed coup of 15 July 2016. His followers are languishing in their thousands in Turkish jails without trial, and many tens of thousands more have lost their jobs and social position. Those who left Turkey are chased around the world. His movement survives but under severe pressure. "Hocaefendi" Gülen himself is in danger of being extradited to the very place where his nemesis, Turkey's ever more authoritarian and Islamist leader Erdogan, calls for reinstating the death penalty for "traitors".

It was not always thus. Although they have their roots in rather different Sufi currents and developed different strategies, both Erdogan and Gülen were in the 1990s leaders of a conservative religious reaction who cooperated against Turkey's "Kemalist" secularist order. Atatürk's heirs had for decades been losing legitimacy and prestige and depended on the military to maintain their primacy. Erdogan led the Islamically-oriented political party AKP, and Gülen a ditto spiritual and officially apolitical movement (*Hizmet* or "Service"). Although neither defended very progressive changes, this odd pair became Turkey's main force of democratization. Gülen developed schools, enterprises, media, and NGOs; their influence was pivotal to bringing Erdogan's AKP to power in 2002. In the early 2000s, working on separate tracks, the two leaders defanged the generals, brought about a spurt in Turkey's economy, and modernized the country by setting it on the road to globalization and to the European Union.

However, putting the country under firmer civilian control and more in general diminishing the power of their common secularist foe also eliminated the rationale for cooperation between Turkey's leading party AKP with its junior partner, the Gülenist movement. Over the past years, the divergence between the two Islamic tendencies has

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become more visible. Interestingly, both leaders have ideologically moved in opposite directions. Erdogan has gradually shed his pro-democracy, pro-Western and pro-modern credentials in favor of a more outspoken Islamist program at home. He reduces democracy to a useful *strategy* and dreams aloud of a new Ottoman Empire: abroad Turkey follows a more explicit Middle-Eastern (and recently even pro-Russian) orientation. Gülen has meanwhile moved in the opposite direction, embracing ever more forcefully *values* of pluralism and democracy as religiously legitimate political choices, humanitarian service as an expression of religious devotion, and interreligious dialog instead of a clash of civilizations. He is favorable to Western democracies and surprisingly open-minded about Israel. For its admirers, Gülen's humane cosmopolitanism represents a promising Islamic alternative to jihadism. For Gülen's detractors, he is a wolf in sheep's cloth. In this competition, as a grassroots movement mobilizing the energies of countless idealistic and often prosperous and/or well-educated adherents, the Gülenists had initially the upper hand over the more blatantly power-oriented party machine of the AKP. Soon Erdogan began to complain of the infiltration of Gülen's cadres in the institutions of the State. From 2013 on, when Gülenists implicated Erdogan and his circle in a vast corruption scheme, cooperation turned into open enmity and (at least from Erdogan's side) into personal rivalry. The Turkish government closed down as much as possible Hizmet-related schools and organizations.

The responsibilities of the 2016 coup remain murky. Erdogan's accusations against FETÖ, Gülen's supposed "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization" have so far not impressed Western governments; some observers even argue that the 15th of July might have been a preventive "self-coup" orchestrated by Erdogan. Whatever the truth of the matter, the repression unleashed after its unraveling has driven *Hizmet* underground in Turkey, and on the run in the rest of the world. Erdogan's Turkey has joined the growing league of "illiberal democracies"…

A small Brazilian delegation was invited in late November 2017 to meet with Gülen. Below we present important excerpts of the hour-long conversation the participants held with him. Three points that stand out:

First, Gülen attempts to keep to the "Islamic mainstream", carefully avoiding any positions that might render him vulnerable to charges of sectarianism.

In the second place, within his consensual Islam, he emphasizes values of commonality, tolerance, and powersharing. That would, Gülen argues, constitute the most hopeful approach, for instance to solve the Syrian crisis or address the Kurdish problem in Turkey's own backyard. This represents a remarkable evolution for a thinker who started as a Turkish nationalist. It is also consonant with the liberal values of a movement that in recent years has strongly internationalized and is at present active in tens of countries.

Lastly, on the issue of the roots of Erdogan's hostility, Gülen points rightly at the impressive network of schools and NGOs his own movement has established in Turkey

and abroad, and which Erdogan failed to manipulate for his own purposes. Envy at his competitor's success in molding a new generation is one factor in what otherwise seems an irrational rage. To his well-known instruction "build schools instead of mosques", Gülen might have added that education and critical thinking are the most effective ramparts against the authoritarianism and obscurantism that threaten to engulf his country today.

The interview below was held in Portuguese and Turkish and is presented here in English translation checked by the interpreter present at the encounter.

Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, 18 November 2017

Question: What is specific to Hizmet theology compared to other trends in contemporary (modernist) Islamic currents?

Answer: A difficult question. All (monotheistic) religions since Adam are built on the same set of four principles:

1) Belief in God and in His attributes
2) Belief in prophets thru whom God communicates with mankind
3) The practice of adelet (justice) and ibadat (rituals, straight life)
4) Belief in the Day of Judgment

Details may differ among religions but the big lines are the same.

Although all great religions share a common origin and teachings, due to differences of interpretation and alterations in their [sacred] writings, we see divergences. Yet in terms of universal values and the above-mentioned principles, they converge.

Q: But how is your thought in particular different from other tendencies within Islam?

A: it is not appropriate to detail this.

[*According to an inside observer who sat in on our conversation, Gülen understood the question very well, but did not want to answer: he does not want to leave the impression as if he had invented a new Islamic theology or a "new Islam". Rather he emphasized what in his (and Hizmet's) understanding, are Islam's crucial points, viz. the questions of faith mentioned above, universal values, and respect of differences*.]

Q: How are Hizmet thought and Sufism (*tasawwuf*) related?

A: Sufism is concerned with leaving aside worldly life in favor of man's spiritual side. The way of Sufism looks for answers and solutions in the REAL sense of life. In practicing the Sufi way, one discovers the existence of several levels of reality. However, some things can only be experienced, not described from outside. It is an internal process.

The German poet Goethe said that God's real essence could never be fully understood. What is important is to have an INTEGRAL vision: even systems of universal values such as what humanism, feminism and other social movements search for from within their partial perspective, is the same as what Sufism proposes from an integral vision. Some look for life's real sense through a monastic lifestyle, by insulating themselves from society. In itself this is not wrong. However, Islam's biggest problem today is its representation. Sufism has a vision that protects against extremisms such as political Islam, Boko Haram etc.

Q: Hizmet fits Brazil's tolerant mentality well. Hizmet has become well-known. Thanks to the work of CCBT and similar groups, many in Brasília show greater interest in Turkish affairs. They also view the conflict between Erdogan and Gülen through Hizmet eyes. This is even true of the Brazilian government.

A: This to the credit of you, our friends. I am very grateful for the attention you have given to Hizmet and to our friends. If a new world war breaks out, starting for instance with this tension between the US and North Korea, due to today's more advanced technologies, the outcome will be much worse than that of previous wars. What the world needs is not polarization but peace.

Q: I would like to understand how you see the enmity of Erdogan against you. The Turkish government has of course its own explanation of "Gülen working to overthrow it". If this were true, its opposition to Hizmet would be well understandable. However, I think these are lies. Yet if Turkey's official justification is based on a lie, there must be another reason for Erdogan's hatred. What do you think it is? What is the real motive behind this hostility to you?

A: Hizmet has always kept distance from politics. However, when a political party shared our values of democracy and civil rights, then we would support it ad hoc. Thus with [Süleyman] Demirel, whom I met several times at a time Hizmet was still much smaller. And also with open-minded social democrats such as Bülent Ecevit I had many conversations. This allowed us to deploy our activities here in USA. Hizmet schools grew and became even a reference. Also Turgut Özal, who opened Turkey to globalization, was a big friend of ours.

However, when [Necmettin] Erbakan tried to mobilize me into his party, I declined. We are against political Islam. Erdogan, who was a student of Erbakan, used to consult with me too. At times he appeared to support democracy. He pressed us insistently that some Hizmet friends help him. In response I recommended two of our friends, Muhammed Selçuk and Ilhan Isbilen. However, it is wrong to call this an alliance. We supported AKP from the outside because of its activities in favor of democracy.

What caused Erdogan's to turn against me? Two factors stand out. First, Erdogan is envious of Hizmet's activities and success all over the world. As a person he is full of rancor because he is unable to duplicate these.

Secondly, there is the issue of Hizmet schools. We operate hundreds of them in Turkey and in some 170 countries around the world, more than 1.400 schools. Erdogan wanted to control our network as a tool to further his aim of dominating the entire Islamic world, as caliph. But Hizmet refused to be used in such a way. Then Erdogan thought: if they don't help me in this, they can't exist, and started to close our schools.

The Kurds and Syria are two other elements. I advised Erdogan, by letter and through some congressman who visited me here, to grant the Kurds wider access to schools and universities, and to introduce a more liberal regime regarding Kurdish language use, and perhaps to establish a federal system like here in USA. For some time Erdogan followed the line of liberalization and negotiation. But then he returned to repression. This is not going to work though. Turkey needs a more federal regime.

As for Syria, for a long time Erdogan wanted very much to go to Damascus, to pray in the Omayyad mosque. This, he supposed, would have a symbolic echo, as this was the place where the caliphate was proclaimed. To achieve this, he needed rapprochement with Assad. I thought, on the other hand, that Syria just like Turkey itself needed democratization, in order to accommodate all its sects. I wrote to Erdogan that he should convince Assad to democratize Syria. Neither regime violence nor violent revolution is the solution. In a transitional period, Assad might even remain president for one or two mandates, before retiring. All this more or less according to the Atatürk model. [Turkish] Ministers [Bülent] Arinç and [Ahmet] Davutoglu visited me here: I reiterated the same message for Erdogan through them. However, Erdogan wanted to establish a more direct domination over Syria and rejected my idea.

I think these are the principal reasons behind Erdogan's rancor.

Q: Your analysis sheds much light on the situation. We share a number of principles. What would you suggest non-Muslim outsiders can do to help moderate and peace-oriented Muslim groups like yours?

A: With your knowledge and insight you will know much better what to do. To recommend anything to you goes beyond my ability. It would be presumptuous on my part to dictate anything. Everybody has to decide that for himself.