Turkey and Ethiopia at Crossroads: Ahbashism and Gulenism

The recently aborted coup attempt in Turkey has been the currency of many discussions and debates in the mass media for a quiet sometime, a discussion that, time and again, resurrected and, in some important ways also, paralleled the unsuccessful popular resistance to the military takeover of Egyptian's blood-earned democracy. While the Egyptian military-led coup appears to have fundamentally exploited both internal and external bystanders and supporters, the same thing cannot be said for the aborted Gulen-backed military coup attempt in Turkey. Although, undeniably, the Gulen movement might have possibly amassed a huge popular base through various arrangements, it has nevertheless miserably failed to channel it along military coup, or more generally, for political purposes. This, unlike a significant proportion of the Egyptian mass, vividly unveiled the level of the culture of politics and democracy among Turkish citizens. The successful confrontation of almost all Turkish citizens against the military coup plotters can be taken as one of a kind-an impeccable move ever in the history of coup in Turkey. Put in yet other words, a military coup attempt to overturn democracy was successfully neutralized by the decisive move of Turkish citizens and thereby further cementing the foundation of realistic democracy in Turkey.

Above all, it has left some important lessons-legacies in modern Turkish political history: for one thing, a lesson that any future coup attempts need to extremely ponder over if there can, probably, be of anything of this sort! And secondly, a lesson, no matter how various interest groups and states with vested interests in Turkey kept quiet, and more often than not, appearing indifferent to the ongoing undemocratic usurpation of popular will and power, which they might have partly succeeded in Egypt, that Turkey's internal and external political landscape and parameters will no longer be the same. Put simply, politically cultured Turkish citizens bravely and unswervingly fought on the ground to re-position the democratic political order right in its place and more!

Gulenism in Turkey and Beyond: Sawing the Seeds of Destruction

As of now, it is a cold hard fact that at the core of Turkey's illusory coup attempt, no doubt, visibly standout Fetuhullah Gulen and the so-called Hizmet movement. In fact, a growing concrete evidences point to a single unequivocal direction, a direction that systematically feed on a pattern of connecting webs of implicit and explicit networks-with direct and interlocking bond with Fetuhullah Gulen. Drawing from my own readings; discussions with fellow Turks; and direct observation as the coup unfolds, I will highlight some of the inherent dangers that, at the end of the day, defines Gulenism as an ideology and movement. I will, however, limit scope wise my reflections to two mutually interrelated dangers Gulenism posed-and-poses to the world in general and Turkey, in particular.

For one thing, at societal level, the ideological foundation of the movement appears to synthesis education and modernism with Islam. However, despite its initial successes locally and, in some cases, overseas, it has left some unbridled slits that would ultimately endanger the back bone of any society where they function-culture, history and, most importantly, religion. In spite of its philanthropic appeal and engagements with the wider population, here in Turkey and beyond, it has nevertheless down played the importance of identity expressed through history, culture and religion. Coloring its movements with pseudo-religious ideas under Sufism (an absurd and 'modernized' form of knowing the unknown, 'ilm al ghayb' and 'Kashf' through personal and electronic intelligence and many other pseudo-Sufi orientations and practices); Abrahamism (a significant dose of what Arabs might call 'Talfiq' or an English rendering of which entails 'piecing together' Judaism, Christianity, and Islam); unconventional yet harmful religious rulings (his controversial and ill-conceived 'Fatawa' encompasses issues pertaining to daily prayer, women-men relations, bank interest, and many others); and the list does not stop here and it goes on, it has been a source of societal crisis.

One of the areas in which Gulenism could have caused-it might already have caused significant damages-is in the psycho-social development of the young generation in various Gulen funded dormitories here in Turkey and elsewhere. They provide mechanisms through which students are made to develop a close mind set, only read and rehearse Gulen's words as expressed through his various writings even at the expense of foundational religious commands and norms. This manifests, for instance, through the neglect of reading the Qur'an or offering prayers five times a day. In fact, one would argue, despite the comfort it promises to render, almost all of Gulen held dormitories throughout the country and elsewhere served as a ground for what psychologists might call an "operant conditioning".

Another related dimension to this problem is, the movement's total ignorance of history, both Ottoman and Islamic history, in its various activities-educations and conferences, either here in Turkey or elsewhere. Gulen's writings, for the most part, are covered in their faces with religious symbols, of some common Quranic verses and prophetic traditions. However, his beyond average tendency to deploy and recycle concepts like tolerance, dialogue, coexistence, pluralism and multiculturalism, unless used under specific circumstances; they only remain to serve a sterile polemics.

Ahbashism, Gulenism and Ethiopia: A Critical Juncture

An important case in point here is the time when I had the chance to participate in one of Gulen's organized conferences, likely to have been requested by the ministry of Federal Affairs, which was then under Dr Shiferaw Hailemariam, in Ethiopia. It was on Monday, May 28, 2012 that the conference was held at the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I should mention, however, that at this time around already we had a significant friction with our government on religious matters in Ethiopia. In other words, it could have been less likely that the conference was held in Ethiopia if it had not been for this triggering state of affair back in Ethiopia. In any case, I, much like other academics, religious scholars and other invited guests, had the chance to participate in this event. In this conference, titled *"Sustaining the Culture of Coexistence and Mutual Understanding"*, apart from the message-letter sent by Gulen himself, lectures were given by other associated personalities like Abdulla Antepli, a member of Duke University.

As far as I can remember, our impression of this event was, frankly speaking, paradoxical. On the one hand, there were those who took relevant and positive lessons from the event, and there were others-this includes me-who did not necessarily take it for granted, given the already staggering friction set in motion by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, due to its constant tampering with the religious establishment in Ethiopia, on the other. In this later framing of the event, there was a growing suspicion that the EPRDF regime was working with Gulen's movement in an effort to use religion for social control in the country.

As I have raised this issue in a fairly detailed manner in one of my articles: *"The Muslims in Ethiopia Complex" (African Studies Quarterly (2015), University of Florida),* a growing Muslim activism characterized by the search of identity and role in Ethiopia gave the two and half decades old regime an unsettling headache. In an effort to put this pressure under its control, the regime had to resort to various measures, from torturing, killing and detaining Muslims whom the government alleged for terrorism and extremism in Ethiopia, to adopting more of pragmatic state-serving religious policies. With the intention of loosening the ever-growing Muslims' protest, it has been alleged that this regime, especially the Ministry of Federal Affairs under Dr Shiferaw Hailemarim, approached key personalities in Gulen's movement (possibly, Fetuhullah Gulen himself) for possible ways that would serve as a safety valve to Muslims-EPRDF fallout. It appears, however, that the effort did not turn out to be what the EPRDF officials thought it would. In fact, we see a fundamental shift in EPRDF's strategy for curbing the resentment of Muslim Ethiopians to more of a strict classical conditioning of a religious sect or cult-Ahbashism alien to Muslim Ethiopians as a society, in the subsequent periods.

The Ahbash cult, in as much as the cult of Gulen, has multiple faces. Like Fetuhullah Gulen, the Ahbash cult traces its origin to a self proclaimed reformer named Abdullah Al-Hariri who developed its theological foundations radically different, on many fundamental ways, from the conventional theological and epistemological traditions rooted among Muslim Ethiopians and elsewhere in the world. Although, as of recently, the government is trying to institutionalize it at different levels in the country, it remains as the single most powerful source of antagonism between the EPRDF regime and Muslim Ethiopians. In fact, this rejection of governments' attempt to deploy Ahbashism in Ethiopia is met with one of the strongest and unparalleled protest to have ever taken place in the history of Islam and Muslims in Ethiopia. Secondly, although there is a claim that Al Hariri was from the Harar town of Ethiopia, it remains to be a fact that Ahbashism as a cult, institution and religious sect was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. Due primarily to this, its theological-ontological as well as epistemological categories, concepts, ideas, and more generally, its world views fundamentally lacks locality, a state of "Ethiopian-ness", both in cultural and historical terms.

Thirdly, much like Gulen's welfare and global activities in Turkey and around the world, Ahbashism uses the *"Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP)"* to promote its own version of philanthropic-charity activities; "moderate" form of Islam; promotes school-education; runs Sufi circles; undertakes regular conferences and seminars; run its own publication houses-publishers, promotes the writings of Al-Hariri

around the world-from the Middle East, Europe, Africa, North America, to Asia. Unlike Gulenism, which only came to light from their dark and indirect involvement in politics as of recently in their bold move to topple down a democratically elected president, Ahbashism simultaneously pursues politics and other socio-cultural and religious activities since its initial institutional inception in the past, especially in Lebanon. In fact, they have their own party and political representations in the parliament, of Lebanon.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, neither Gulenism nor Ahbashism represent the interest and will of the peoples living in Turkey, Ethiopia or elsewhere. As their fate lately came to unfold, and the way how it should ideally be dealt, the people decide and the government follows. This has so far been materialized in Turkey. Although the friction between EPRDF's government backed Ahbashism and the rest of Muslim Ethiopians continues for some time, it will, at a certain point in time, follow suit for so long as the will of the people remains intact and the possibility that the regime realizes, at some point, its grand and erroneous mistakes.