Gulen’s approach to peace, democracy and human rights and the current threat it faces in Turkey and beyond

Fethullah Gulen, an Islamic thinker, peace advocate and preacher emeritus, based in Pennsylvania has inspired a movement known as Hizmet (service) or Gulen movement. Estimates suggest 2-5 million participants and sympathizers around the world (known to be active in 160+ countries) through service projects in the fields education, interfaith activism, relief and health services. The movement is now facing an existential threat initially after the corruption probe against Erdogan and his Ministers, and increased oppression and persecution since the July 15 coup attempt.

The threat to the movement not only affects the Turkish Republic but many countries in the region and beyond. With more than 100,000 people purged from the State bureaucracy and more than 30,000 imprisoned (and reports of torture and rape reported by Amnesty International [1] and HRW [2] ), the voids left in education, academia, security and intelligence become apparent.

In the region reports of movement institutions possibly closing have lead to fear in some quarters as reported by RNS:

Rev. Wilybard Lagho, Mombasa Roman Catholic diocese vicar general, said he would lament the demise of Gulen schools. “Islam is taught in the schools together with other universal values. I think young Muslims will most likely suffer setbacks with any closure,” [3]

As Gulen suggested in the Politico interview:

President Erdoğan appears determined to wipe all the institutions set up by Hizmet participants and prevent any future attempts to establish any new institutions. This is contrary to [the] Turkish constitution and all the international agreements Turkey is a party to. But unless world leaders take a stance with effective measures against this witch hunt, there is no internal dynamic in Turkey to stop the president. [4]

The threat to Gulen’s ideas by way of attacks on the movement, particularly in the third world and less democratic countries poses not only a danger to the institutions itself but to the values that these organizations espouse. As suggested in the RNS article

As is apparent in op-eds and interviews in the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Le Monde, Financial Times and elsewhere, Gulen’s progressive and inclusive thinking regarding terror,
CVE and extremism, education and pluralism, democracy and human rights are critical to a moderate understanding of Islam that is both modern and loyal to tradition sources and allows for engagement with wider global communities.

Again from RNS:
Abdallah Kheri, who in Kenya heads the Islamic Research and Education Trust, worries that shutting Gulen schools and other institutions could leave a vacuum that the so-called Islamic State will seek to fill. “Closing down the institutions would definitely grant gains to the fundamentalists.” [3]

References

1. Turkey: Independent monitors must be allowed to access detainees amid torture allegations

2. Turkey: Emergency Decrees Facilitate Torture

3. As Gulen movement contracts in Africa, worry over who will fill the vacuum

4. Fethullah Gülen: ‘I don’t have any regrets’