

Turkey's presidency Is Gul going or coming?

The prime minister looks all-powerful, but the president may yet bounce back

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ERDOGAN'S march to unchecked power is unstoppable. So the prime minister's critics concluded on April 18th when Abdullah Gul, the president, declared: "I have no political plans for the future." Mr Gul, a co-founder of the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party, was seen as the only figure of sufficient weight to challenge Mr Erdogan. Indeed, he had seemed keen to swap jobs with him this summer—until the March 30th local elections.



Tell me what to do, pleads Gul

A torrent of sleaze allegations against Mr Erdogan and his circle might have dented AK, forcing him to cede leadership to Mr Gul. But AK thrashed its rivals, taking 45% of the vote. Mr Erdogan may now run as Turkey's first directly elected president in August (a new poll gives him 51% support), and install a puppet prime minister, not Mr Gul, in his place. He may even revive dreams of boosting the formal powers of the presidency so that he can keep calling the shots, including

rejigging the electoral system to help AK in next year's general election.

Mr Gul must feel betrayed. He broadly stuck by Mr Erdogan during last summer's anti-government protests, and has recently signed a raft of illiberal laws that helped the prime minister to stifle the corruption probe. His supporters said the ends justified the means; once Mr Gul became prime minister, he could undo his predecessor's measures. Besides, Islam frowns upon *fitnah* (a Koranic word referring to discord among Muslims), so challenging Mr Erdogan directly is hard. Yet not all the pious agree. "It is the corruption claims and the prime minister's polarising style that are harming Islam," argues Levent Gultekin, a liberal Islamic writer. "Gul ought to have spoken up."

In fact Mr Gul may be bluffing. His decision to leave politics, he said, was based on "present conditions". Might he hope to lure disgruntled AK members into a new party? After all, that is what he and Mr Erdogan did in 2001 when they broke with their mentor, the late Necmettin Erbakan. And despite talk of their being "brothers", the rivalry between the two men has run deep, not least after Mr Gul became president in 2007.

The trouble is they share the same political base, and it is Mr Erdogan who has the upper hand. "He has very deep pockets. His control over AK is near absolute," comments a Western diplomat in Ankara. His biggest problem is that the economy is so vulnerable, since a big part of AK's support is based on Turkey's recent economic success. Another concern is the Kurds, whose support he needs to win the presidency. That could involve more concessions to the PKK rebels, with whom the government has been holding peace talks, but generosity to them would only alienate Turkey's nationalists. Such conundrums explain why it may be premature to write off the endlessly resourceful Mr Gul.

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