

Under normal circumstances the tension between the two men would amount to little more than mildly titillating gossip—hardly consequential given the formal rules of Turkish politics, which place the weight of executive power in the hands of the Prime Minister. Yet it is precisely this balance that makes the relationship between Davutoglu and Erdogan so important because it is inextricably linked with the latter's desire to alter the character of Turkey's political system. Since the June 2011 elections when the AKP won 49.8 percent of the popular vote, Erdogan has made it clear that he wants to do away with Turkey's hybrid presidential-parliamentary system and replace it with a purely presidential one.

It was obvious last August when Erdogan was elected President that he wanted Davutoglu to be Prime Minister because, despite five years as Turkey's high-profile Foreign Minister, the bookish academic is not a skilled politician and thus has little, if any, in the way of a popular following. Davutoglu's success is linked to his relationship with Gul—whom he advised when the former President was at the foreign ministry—and his long service to Erdogan. Still, the uneasy ties between the two men are hardly unexpected. His political deficits aside, Davutoglu is ambitious and believes himself to be an important global thinker who understands the currents of history and Turkey's unique place in it. In private, Erdogan barely rates a mention in Davutoglu's discussion of Turkish foreign policy. Now that he is Prime Minister, with all of the authority that Turkey's current constitution affords that position, Davutoglu wants to be his own man. This puts him in direct conflict with Erdogan, who has pushed the formal powers of the presidency to their limits while leveraging the stature and esteem he accumulated during his 11 years as Prime Minister to remain the single most important actor in the political arena.

The combination of personal ambition and the way Turkey's political institutions divvy up power in the political arena are the roots of the conflict between Erdogan and Davutoglu. In early January, Davutoglu announced reforms designed to root out corruption, vowing to "break the arm" of any member of parliament seeking financial gain from their official position. He also let it be known, albeit implicitly, that he had no objection to a possible Supreme Court case trying four former ministers—all close associates of Erdogan—for corruption. The President killed the initiative and made sure that his courtiers would remain free from legal jeopardy, reportedly telling Davutoglu that with his reforms no one would want to serve in parliament. There was actually more at stake for Erdogan, however. Davutoglu's reforms would have made it harder for Erdogan to keep his well-developed patronage networks primed and to protect his allies, inflicting damage on the president's prestige and influence.

Next, Davutoglu coaxed Hakan Fidan, a close Erdogan confidante and head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (known as MIT), to leave the agency in order run for parliament as a member of the AKP. Erdogan was unhappy on two accounts. The MIT and Fidan have been indispensable to Erdogan in his ongoing effort to destroy Fethullah Gulen. The secretive theologian and his network of followers in the press, business community, bureaucracy, and national law enforcement are widely believed to have been behind the release of illegal wiretaps revealing corruption at the highest levels of the

Turkish government, including Erdogan and members of his family. Fidan is also Erdogan's point man on Syria and the Turkish government's relationship with Iran. With such an influential figure in parliament—and likely the next Foreign Minister—Davutoglu would have an ally in building a base of power independent of the President. When the news first broke of Fidan's resignation, it was clear that Erdogan was caught unaware of Davutoglu's maneuverings. It did not take very long for the President to regain his bearings. Within a month Erdogan forced Fidan to withdraw his bid for parliament and pressured Davutoglu to reappoint him as the head of MIT.

The most recent scuffle had little to do with Davutoglu directly, but rather the Deputy Prime Minister and cofounder—along with Erdogan and Abdullah Gul—of the AKP, Bulent Arinc. After reports that the government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party had agreed to a roadmap for finally resolving Turkey's Kurdish problem, Erdogan assailed the deal and declared, "There is no Kurdish problem." In response, Arinc, who tangled with Erdogan over the handling of the Gezi Park protests in the spring and summer of 2013, basically told the President to mind his own business, which in turn touched off a nasty public spat between Arinc and Ankara's Mayor, Melih Gokcek, a loyal and thuggish Erdogan political enforcer.

Arinc was correct on the substance, of course. Given the distribution of powers in the Turkish system, it was not the President's place to assert himself in the negotiations, something Erdogan himself would have never tolerated when he was bargaining with the Kurds. At the same time, Erdogan must have palm slapped his forehead, thinking that both Davutoglu and Arinc are political dullards. Two months before a parliamentary election is just about the worst time for the government to be touting progress on the Kurdish issue, since the AKP shares a constituency with the Nationalist Movement Party. The MHP—as it is known—is polling pretty well and is deeply suspicious of Kurdish demands for cultural rights and a measure of political autonomy. Erdogan, who never leaves an election to chance, would clearly prefer it if the government tacked to the nationalist right in order not to cede any votes to the MHP and then pick up negotiations with the Kurds after the AKP secured another comfortable parliamentary majority.

All this skirmishing revolves around something much more than corruption, Hakan Fidan's job, or even the way out of the debilitating encounter between Turkish and Kurdish nationalism. These are to varying degrees important, but not as critical as a new constitution, which will determine the trajectory of Turkey's political development for generations. There are few who would argue that Turkey does not need a new constitution, as the current one dates back to the waning days of the military junta that ruled the country from 1980-83. It is the kind of constitution that Erdogan wants that is the source of much controversy. He wants a new constitution to establish a presidential system in which all of the executive's powers flow to the head of state, razing the country's current system. Erdogan and his supporters argue that the change is necessary in order to ensure political stability and government effectiveness. This is why the upcoming parliamentary elections are so important for Erdogan. If the AKP can secure a two-thirds majority in the 550-seat legislature, the party can push through a new

constitution without having to submit it to a referendum, where its passage is less assured.

It is clear, however, that Erdogan does not have the American system in mind, having once quipped that President Barack Obama cannot sell a helicopter without getting the approval of Congress. Davutoglu had been noticeably cool to this idea of presidentialism on the account that abolishing the prime ministry might mean the end of his political career. There are no guarantees that Erdogan would invite him back to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, Davutoglu-the-academic surely knows that democracies tend to break down more often in presidential than in parliamentary systems. Not that Turkey is or ever was a democracy. Nevertheless, after enormous pressure from Erdogan, Davutoglu has fallen into line, publicly endorsing the shift to presidentialism.

It seems to have dawned on some among the AKP elite that for all of his political talents and his achievements, Erdogan is becoming a problem. That what is good for the Buyuk Usta—or “Great Master” as the fawning press refers to the President—may not be good for Turkey or their own interests after all. Bullying the country’s central bankers, locking up journalists, undermining checks and balances (never that strong to begin with), and destroying relationships with important countries may have political benefits at home, but it is not cost free. As Arinc is reported to have remarked, “half the country hates us.” Leaders cannot get great things done when their society is polarized, and in Turkey Erdogan is the primary reason why Turks are so divided. People like Arinc and Davutoglu are also apparently coming to the realization that while they and the AKP more broadly have enabled Erdogan, he and his style of governance is not necessarily good for their own careers.

The effort to cut the President down to size has failed miserably. Erdogan has defeated every effort to get around him, revealing Davutoglu’s ambitions to be far greater than his political skills. And while it is unclear that AKP can win the 367-seat majority necessary to avoid a referendum on a new constitution, never count Erdogan out. There is no one in Turkey who is as charismatic as Erdogan; he has a broad network of supporters in virtually every corner of Anatolia and unrivaled sources of patronage. Expect him to use all three attributes to his advantage in the next eight weeks. He is also paranoid and desperate—two positive traits in politicians. Short of digging Ataturk up from the dead, no one can touch Erdogan. That’s why, whether he likes it or not, Davutoglu may soon be out of a job.