

Turkish ‘terrorists’ in our midst? Erdogan ambassador and Turkish international private schools in the Philippines

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Like a bolt of lightning in a stormy sky, the ambassador of Turkey to Manila, Esra Cankorur, has revealed that terrorists from her own country are active in the Philippines, using private schools, civic forums, and business organizations as fronts. Philippine officials are expected not to take this exposé lightly, coming as it does in the wake of reports that foreign jihadists have reached Mindanao and have been sighted in the fighting in Marawi.

Two of the schools that Ms Cankorur named — the Fountain International School, located in one of the busiest streets in San Juan, Metro Manila, and the Tolerance School in Zamboanga City in Mindanao — are known for the high quality of education they offer. These international schools have taught, over the years, children of middle-class and professional families, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The Turkish envoy claims that these institutions are part of a global terrorist network known in Turkey as “Feto,” or Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization. It seems that she feels justified in using the terrorist label because some members of this group have been implicated in the bloody military coup attempt against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 15, 2016. But, outside of this purely domestic event, she offers no evidence of the group’s involvement in any terrorist attack anywhere in the world. The spiritual leader of the group, M. Fethullah Gülen, is accused of being the brain behind the coup attempt. But, again, the role played by the ailing 75-year-old US-based preacher has not been proven in an impartial investigation. The US government has so far ignored the Turkish government’s demand for the extradition of Gülen, who has lived a reclusive life in rural Pennsylvania.

In her commentary carried by the Philippine Star, Ambassador Cankorur concludes: “Thus, Feto does not only constitute a national security threat for Turkey but also for any country in which its affiliates find existential and operational ground. This is why we call on the international community, or allies and friends to be vigilant against their activities.”

There are indeed Turkish international schools in the country, but I am not aware they are run by terrorists. Many years ago, I was a guest of the Italian Catholic missionary, Fr. Sebastiano d’Ambra, at his retreat center in Zamboanga called “Harmony Village.” Next to his place was an educational institution called “Tolerance School.” What a fine mix of virtues in a troubled land, I told Father D’Ambra, who, noting my curiosity, offered to introduce me to the school’s Turkish principal. Expecting a school modeled after the madrasah schools I once saw in Indonesia, I was surprised to find one that followed an advanced curriculum with special focus on science and math.

It was my first encounter with the Turkish lay missionaries who form “Hizmet,” a term that means service. I have since had a chance to interact with their Manila-based members, who have settled here with their families. I found them to be, far from being secretive, open and extroverted. We hardly talked about religion. They have probably done more to promote goodwill between Turkey

and the Philippines than our own respective governments can hope to do. In a better time, they should be recipients of diplomatic medals in recognition of their valuable contribution to fostering good relations between the two nations.

Today, ironically, their government disparagingly calls them “Feto,” describing them as a “cult” fanatically worshipping at the feet of their master, Gülen. Inside Turkey, the Erdogan regime portrays Gülen as the head of a hidden “parallel state” manned by trusted disciples inside the judiciary, the security agencies, and top layers of the bureaucracy.

Following the attempted military coup of July 2016, a brutal purge aimed at everyone who had any links to Gülen or Hizmet caused the dismissal of more than 150,000 civil servants and the detention of more than 50,000 individuals from business, the press, the academe, the military and the police, etc. But, in reality, the campaign against suspected “Gülenists” in the government and in the media began as early as 2013, after the police started investigating highly placed officials of the regime for corruption.

Before that, Hizmet enjoyed great influence in the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party), and Gülen himself was known to be a friend and adviser of President Erdogan. I personally witnessed this myself while visiting Turkey in 2010 as part of a small academic delegation, headed by the president of the University of the Philippines, on the invitation of Fatih University in Istanbul. A constitutional referendum was then in progress, and I could see how our hosts shared in the triumph of the constitutional reforms being pushed by the Erdogan government.

We met professors and scholars in the sciences and modern professions, trained in the most advanced institutions in the United States and Europe, who seemed to draw fulfillment in the seamless articulation of their scientific work with fidelity to the values drawn from their faith tradition. How strange, I said to myself, that it is in the lives of these highly educated Muslim academics that I would see the blending of faith and reason that Pope Emeritus Benedict had often written about.

It is difficult to see in the work of these young, bright, and modern Turks the seeds of a sinister type of terrorism. But, having declared them to be enemies of the state, the Turkish government appears bent on using its consulates abroad to destroy their credibility and lifetime work. Fearful families could begin withdrawing their children from their schools. I hope our government does not compound such a mistake by launching a witchhunt against them or, worse, by sending them back to Turkey, where persecution likely awaits them.

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P.S.

* Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:10 AM July 16, 2017:
<http://opinion.inquirer.net/105604/turkish-terrorists-midst#ixzz4nquG4mYP>
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