

Dani Rodrik's weblog

Unconventional thoughts on economic development and globalization

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Did Microsoft steal its fonts from the Turkish army?

By Dani Rodrik

The Turkish court that sentenced more than 300 officers on coup plotting charges in September apparently thinks so.

The Turkish military has long set the ground rules for Turkish politics, and this was hailed as a landmark trial. Many saw it as the centerpiece of a democratic, mildly Islamist government's long overdue reckoning with the army's misdeeds.

If the charges in the case are to be believed, misdeeds there were aplenty. Prosecutors had in hand CDs, apparently from 2003 that contained detailed military plans to destabilize the country and dislodge the newly-elected AKP government from power. According to the documents in the CDs, General Cetin Dogan, then commander of the Istanbul-based 1st Army commander, and his collaborators had prepared horrific operations, including the downing of a Turkish military, the bombing of two mosques, and the targeting of Armenian intellectuals, in order to lay the groundwork for the coup. They had drawn up lists of journalists and politicians to be arrested, selected a new cabinet, and even prepared an economic program for the new government.

The trial was marred by irregularities from the very beginning. The CDs were never properly authenticated beyond the date and author information in the metadata. A report that found the documents could not be traced to military computers vanished. Exonerating evidence uncovered by the prosecutors was placed under seal and hid from the defense. The presiding judge, who had ruled previously in favor of some of the defendants' requests, was replaced two days before the trial opened. The pleas of defendants who proved they were out of the country on the dates they supposedly authored the documents met no response. A growing list of anachronisms and other inconsistencies in the documents was passed over. Meanwhile pro-government and Gülenist media had a field day, spreading rampant disinformation about the case and the defendants.

But the real shocker came when the court finally provided digital copies of the incriminating CDs to the defense, nearly two years after they had been delivered to the

prosecutors. American, German, and Turkish forensic experts hired by the defense were able to establish conclusively that the CDs had been forged.

And here is where Microsoft enters the picture.

The centerpiece of the prosecution's case is a MS Word document, titled "Operation Sledgehammer." This document, which gives the case its name, describes the rationale for the military takeover and the broad contours of the plan. It carries the date December 2002 and is has General Dogan's name underneath. On the face of it, there is nothing in the digital file that would contradict this information. The metadata shows a last-saved date of December 2002 and the putative author to be General Dogan's chief of staff. (Dogan retired from the army in late 2003.) The CD on which it is found was apparently burned in a single session on March 2003. The document is written using the Arial font and was saved in MS Word 1997, both of which were widely in use in 2003.

Yet when forensic experts looked more closely at the document with a Hex editor, which shows all the binary information on the file, they made a discovery that revealed that the metadata had been tampered with. In plain sight on the raw file was a reference to "Calibri," a font that Microsoft introduced with Office 2007 as the new default font for Word, and was first released to the public in mid-2006. The only explanation for this anachronistic reference was that the file had been worked on with Office 2007 before it was ultimately saved in an earlier version of Word. It was clear that "Operation Sledgehammer" could not have been produced and burned onto a CD in 2003.

Digital fingerprints of MS Office 2007 are in fact all over the documents on the incriminating CDs. In addition to Calibri, there are references to the font Cambria and various XML schemas first introduced with Office 2007. In one egregious instance, an Excel file was saved in Calibri so that the font is visible to the naked eye. The forgers apparently forgot to save the document in an earlier font.

All these documents carry last-saved dates from 2002-2003, appear to have been authored by officers on duty at the time, and were burned on CDs that were apparently finalized in March 2003. But the references to Office 2007 leave room for only one conclusion: these documents were in fact prepared years later on backdated computers, with the intention of framing the officers on trial.

Not surprisingly, when these findings were presented to the court, they met the same stony silence that had met earlier indications of forgery. Turkish law allows courts to disregard forensic evidence presented by the defense. Only forensic reports obtained by the court itself carry weight. And the court pointedly refused to assign its own experts on the matter.

By now, even hard-core supporters of the prosecution have had to accept that the evidence in this case is deeply flawed. They no longer talk about the obviously fabricated mosque-bombing, jet-downing, or assassination plans. They have shifted their accusations instead to the contents of a contingency planning seminar held under General

Dogan's supervision in March 2003.

The anonymous informant who passed on the forged CDs bundled them with authentic material, including voice recordings from the seminar. The seminar focused on the army's response to what was called a "worst-case scenario:" rising tensions with Greece compounded by domestic disturbances in the forms of an Islamist uprising. The proceedings reveal an open secret, namely that there was a strong undercurrent of antipathy among the military towards Tayyip Erdogan and his party.

Many now use snippets of those conversations to argue that they constitute ample evidence of a coup plot on their own -- even if the digital Sledgehammer documents themselves are set aside. Never mind that there was no reference to Sledgehammer or any coup in the seminar; that the seminar was attended by observers from the high command in Ankara; that the prosecutors did not attribute any criminal activity to the seminar itself; that the bulk of those found guilty had nothing to do with the seminar; or that most seminar participants were not even indicted.

General Dogan's two superiors at the time, the commander of the land forces and the chief of general staff, were two key witnesses who could have provided useful testimony. The prosecutors claimed that the former had thwarted the Sledgehammer coup, without even bothering to question him. In public, both denied any knowledge of Sledgehammer, but said there had been irregularities in the way the seminar was carried out. The defense repeatedly asked that they be called in as witnesses. The court refused. Did I say this was a kangaroo court?

My wife Pinar Dogan and I have been detailing the Sledgehammer fraud since the CDs first surfaced at the beginning of 2010. Cetin Dogan is my father-in-law, and we obviously have a personal stake in the matter. But our concern extends beyond this specific case and the 300-plus innocent individuals who have been found guilty in a sham trial. The evident framing and massive judicial misconduct on which the Sledgehammer case rests shines a bright light on the kind of country Turkey has become under Tayyip Erdogan and his Gulenist allies. Reminiscent of periods of military rule, the judiciary has turned into a tool for settling scores and remaking Turkish society and politics. The wave of entrapment has so far ensnared military officers, journalists, politicians, Kurdish activists -- indeed opponents of all stripes. In a system that can put you behind bars because of a Word document with your name on it, no-one is safe.

The defendants in the Sledgehammer travesty have at least one thing to look forward to. Their guilty verdict means they must have developed Calibri, Microsoft Office 2007's default font, years before Microsoft says it did. Sorry, Microsoft, you have been caught out. You owe these officers billions of dollars.