

In 2007, accusations of corruption were flying in the Turkish town of Hatay, bordering Syria. In this small municipality, which generates just a fraction of Turkey's national income, at least 250 government contracts were awarded to government officials of the Justice and Development Party (*AKP-Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*).

The AKP is the party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has publicly called for the end of government corruption and bribery. Erdoğan and the AKP say there is no link between their winning elections — like those in Hatay — and corruption. But in 2008, the AKP made more news headlines with allegations of bribery and collusion.

Do As I Say, Not As I Do

In February 2008, Erdoğan said that his government had managed to eradicate corruption and bribery in Turkey through an effective fight. "I want to repeat that our government doesn't tolerate corruption either in the state or in the private sector," he said. But the prime minister's straightforward assurance of zero tolerance contradicted international reports.

Last year, Transparency International ranked Turkey four places lower than in 2006 in its Corruptions Perceptions Index, moving it to 64th place. Analysts expect an even lower ranking for 2008.

In January, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) expressed serious concerns over Turkey's anti-bribery efforts. The organization said that Turkey has been a part of its anti-bribery convention since 2000, but the country has yet to implement key anti-bribery measures.

Only a few days after Erdoğan's February claim that his government eradicated corruption, a blunt — perhaps even a slightly naïve — line came from the head of Turkey's national land registry office.

Responding to criticism that bribery is common in offices under his control, General Director Mehmet Zeki Adli said that the average 22 Turkish liras (US\$15) his officers often took from people did not amount to bribery. They were merely "tips."

Adli said, “[In our tradition] when people marry or buy houses, they hand out tips for happiness. Thus, the citizen leaves a few liras for the civil servant.”

Strangely, while the debate erupted in the media, Turkish experts began to weigh in saying that, indeed, there was a difference between “bribes” and “tips”.

Public Works Minister Faruk Nafiz Ozak said, “One should not confuse a tip with a bribe.” Professor Ilber Ortayli, one of Turkey’s most prominent historians, also joined in, saying, “A tip is a gift. It is not legal, but is ethical.”

A Culture Indifferent to Corruption

Ortayli gave a historian’s perspective on a social ill. But his comment may explain why the Turks are culturally indifferent to corruption.

Dating back hundreds of years to the Ottoman tradition, citizens who had business at government agencies were to leave “a tip” for the official who helped them. Sixteenth century poet Fuzuli highlighted the custom in one of his works. “I gave them my greeting, but they refused since it was not a bribe,” he wrote.

According to economist and historian Mehmet Ali Kiliçbay, accepting tips is not compatible with the responsibility of a public employee.

“Bribery’s roots lie in the tradition of *‘piskes’*,” Kiliçbay said. “In Ottoman times, the sultans were *‘piskes-ed’* if one wanted a specific favor from them. At the beginning of the Republic [in 1923], a serious struggle was waged against this practice, but then it reappeared.”

Public Cases of Alleged Collusion

While some may claim that Turkey’s culture allows for tips, public cases involving large amounts of money seem more than just tips.

In April 2008, a public prosecutor in Istanbul launched a criminal inquiry into the city’s transport authority for allegedly making illegal transactions when it came to acquisitions and contracts during the years of 2005 to 2007.

The investigation began after an Interior Ministry report revealed that the agency systematically avoided public

tenders for contracts worth more than 100 million euros (US\$134.5 million). These contracts included bus purchases from Dutch and German companies, as well as advertising deals.

In May 2008, a court in Ankara sentenced businessman Remzi Gür, one of Erdoğan's closest aides and the sponsor of Erdoğan's daughters' studies in the U.S., to 10 months in prison for offering bribes to an opposition Member of Parliament. Gür was found guilty of offering bribes to MP Mehmet Yildirim in return for his vote in the 2007 presidential election. The court suspended the sentence.

But the first serious allegation in 2008 hit the headlines when business conglomerate Calik Group, run by Erdoğan's son-in-law, appeared as the sole bidder for the country's second biggest media outlet, Sabah-ATV. Unconfirmed reports alleged that other companies interested in bidding for Sabah-ATV had been warned by senior government officials not to do so. Those claims remain unproven to this day.

In another instance relating to the Calik Group's takeover of Sabah-ATV, the bulk of a TL187 billion (US\$1.2 billion) deal had been financed by loans from two state-owned banks. The two banks, Halk Bankasi and Vakifbank, admitted extending US\$750 million in loans to Calik Group but refused to reveal the terms of the lending, citing commercial privacy. Erdoğan argued that the entire deal, both the takeover and the lending, was perfectly legitimate.

More Substantial Cases of Corruption

In Turkish politics most corruption allegations traditionally remain unproven due to lack of documentation. Those who have gained from deals often make the same argument: Can you prove your claim that I have benefited? Since there is no documentation of bribery, it seems impossible to prove these backroom deals.

However, in August 2008, a new allegation about a senior AKP figure produced convincing evidence.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, an opposition MP, announced at a press conference that Saban Disli, AKP's deputy chairman, had signed a business contract, which would give him TL1.5 million (US\$1 million). The deal required Disli to change building permits for land in Istanbul, in which the AKP holds the majority of ruling seats.

Documents, which were revealed to the public, showed that Disli and his business associates had bought the land for TL4.5 million (US\$3 million). After operating changes to the building permits, they sold the land to retailer Tesco-Kipa for TL \$22.5 million (US\$15 million).

Erdoğan remained silent over the ‘Disli Affair’ for nearly three weeks.

After a recent meeting of AKP’s executive committee, Disli announced his resignation from his party jobs — member of the executive committee and deputy chairman. However, he would remain an MP.

Erdoğan said of Disli, “Our friend has shown a great degree of sacrifice.”

Although the opposition insists Disli should be stripped of his parliamentary immunity and stand trial, such an ending would be unlikely.

Corruption Prevalent, But Public Opinion Still Apathetic

The Disli Affair seemed to be the tip of a very big iceberg.

Recently released official documents showed other concerns around the issuing of building permits in Istanbul. These documents revealed that since 2004 the municipality of Istanbul has made more than 4,000 changes in city planning, which means changes to building permits.

Court records show that businessman Nuri Uysen, who is a member of the AKP in the southern industrial city of Gaziantep, had made a far larger fortune than Disli through the same methods.

Uysen purchased a piece of land for about TL\$18 million (US\$12 million). He later sold the property to a Luxembourg-based company for nearly TL\$120 million (US\$80 million) only three days after he had bought it. A month later, the AKP-controlled municipality changed that particular property’s zoning regulations from “farming” to “commercial”.

Sadly, neither the AKP nor its individual members will come under serious legal scrutiny for any of these allegations. MPs still enjoy a parliamentary shield that protects them from prosecution, even though removing

parliamentary immunities was one of Erdogan's pledges before he came to power in November 2002.

Even more sadly, the chances of voters removing the AKP are slim. A public opinion poll in September 2008 showed that 50.9 percent of Turks would vote for the AKP if there were elections today. That's even higher than the 46.5 percent the AKP received in the July 2007 general elections.

That increase in poll ratings, despite several serious corruption allegations, is in line with the findings of another survey. The research house A ve G found that 80 percent of Turkish voters are indifferent to corruption charges against political parties.

