

Nasa scientist researching mission to Mars still in prison a year on from failed Turkey coup



Serkan Golge pictured in front of Nasa spacesuits CREDIT: KUBRA GOLGE

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Serkan Golge had been making dinner with his wife Kubra at his parent's house when came a frantic knock at their front gate. The policemen at the door were in no mood to explain, summarily dragging Mr Golge away in handcuffs to a local station in the southern Turkish city of Antakya.

It was only eight days after last year's failed coup attempt against Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but already the reprisals were in full swing.

The 37-year-old Nasa physicist, a Turkish-American citizen who was working on the manned mission to Mars programme, was one of tens of thousands of academics, police, military and journalists who were rounded up and detained as Mr Erdogan sought to re-establish his grip on power.

CREDIT: AFP

Mr Golge sat through several hours of questioning before being told of his alleged crime - supporting the organisation of Fethullah Gulen, a one-time friend of Mr Erdogan's now living in exile in the US who was accused of orchestrating the attempted putsch.

When officers searched Mr Golge's family home they found a \$1 bill. The bills have come to denote membership of the Islamic cleric's secretive group, with their serial numbers alleged to contain coded meanings.

A Nasa security card found in his wallet was also submitted as evidence he was working as an informant for the CIA.

Mr Golge, who had been living in Houston, Texas, for three years and was only on a month-long holiday in Turkey when he was arrested, has protested his innocence in court, but remains behind bars facing a 15-year jail sentence if convicted.



CREDIT: KUBRA GOLKE

The case has come to symbolise the paranoid Turkish state and the rise of Mr Erdogan's pernicious authoritarianism - as well as increasingly strained relations between Ankara and Washington which has failed to secure his release despite diplomatic pressure.

"We had watched the coup on TV like everyone else," his wife, Mrs Golge told The Telegraph. "If we were guilty we would have run back to America straight away, but we didn't.

"We couldn't ever have imagined something like this could happen. It all still feels like a sick joke," she says.

Saturday will mark a year since the abortive coup, but many in Turkey believe the president has been leading the country backwards, not forwards.

In the last 12 months, Mr Erdogan has imposed an indefinite state of emergency, under which he has managed to vastly extend his powers and imprison anyone he believes to be a threat to his rule.

His increasingly autocratic approach has lost Turkey the dwindling band of friends it once had in Europe and risked its alliance with Nato.

Mass purges in academia, the judiciary and media have left "the nation's best and the brightest either in prison or selling bagels on the street," as Mahir Zeynalov, a Turkish journalist deported for a tweet critical of Mr Erdogan in 2014, puts it.

"If I had not been arrested upon a flagrant slander on July 23, 2016, I at the moment would be continuing research in my office at Nasa as one of the few Turks among the thousands of scientists and engineers who are working in the manned trip to Mars

project,” Mr Golge said when he addressed the judges in his first court appearance earlier this year.

A well-regarded senior researcher at the agency, he had been studying the effects of space radiation on humans in advance of an eventual mission to Mars.

Mrs Golge says an estranged family member who held a grudge over a disputed inheritance tipped off police that her husband was a Gulenist. After the coup, Mr Erdogan called upon citizens to report suspected followers of the cleric.

It would be the beginning of a Kafkaesque nightmare for Mr Golge and his family. He has spent the last 10 months in solitary confinement and has lost more than two stone in weight from the stress.

Mrs Golge, 32, said that despite his dual Turkish-US citizenship he has been denied access to the US consulate.

Behind the scenes, Washington has put considerable pressure on Ankara to release Mr Golge. That he is still in prison is a sign of the US’s waning influence over its Nato ally.

Mr Golge’s case is yet to be heard. A huge backlog is delaying the trial.

“I just want to scream and shout so loud about what is happening to him. He has such an intelligent mind that is wasting away in that cell,” says Mrs Golge, who cannot leave Turkey as she is subject to a travel ban.

The state’s ruthless crackdown on anyone deemed disloyal has created such a climate of fear that most are afraid of speaking up. Mrs Golge now does not even dare talk to friends and neighbours.

Mr Erdogan described last summer's plot as a “gift from God”. The 63-year-old strongman, who leads the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), has long held ambitions for expanded presidential powers.

The July 15 putsch allowed him to present himself as the best cure to the chaos, the declining security situation and flagging economy. In April he put a set of constitutional reforms to a vote, which he won by the thinnest of margins.

Turkey has spent more than 80 years making strides towards democracy after years of military rule. Now, critics and rights activists say, the country is lurching in the opposite direction to rising concerns in the international community.

The European Union, which is considering Turkey for membership, has decried what it sees as a descent into authoritarian rule.

Mr Erdogan does not take kindly to criticism from the bloc, which he believes is taking him for a fool.

“The EU has been giving us the runaround since 1963. And they are still making us wait at the door,” the leader this week told German daily Die Welt in a rare interview with a foreign newspaper.

But Turkey's credit-driven economy is very much linked to the Western financial system. Half of Ankara's foreign trade is with the European Union.

Even if Mr Erdogan wanted to, it would not be easy to turn his back on Europe. And if the president gave up on the moribund ascension bid altogether he would risk a backlash.

Mr Erdogan seems to have spent much of the last year making enemies. In 12 months he has had spats with the EU, the US over its decision to arms the Kurds in Syria, Russia, Germany (which he said was being run by neo-Nazis), the Netherlands (which he called a "Nazi remnant"), and most recently with an alliance of Arab states trying to isolate terrorist-funder Qatar.

Perhaps the most egregious example of them all was allowing his personal bodyguards to beat up Kurdish demonstrators outside the Turkish ambassador's residence during a visit to DC in May.

Instead of extending his apologies to his hosts, the president summoned the US ambassador to explain why the guards were later questioned over the incident.

"Beating up protesters in Washington, his position on the Qatar crisis, reluctance to work with Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS only pushed for his isolation in the world. Turkey is not an international pariah yet, but it sure is on its way to be," analyst Mr Zeynalov says.

"Erdogan is already isolated," counters Aaron Stein, a resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Centre who specialises in Turkey. "Seriously, what major world leader is willing to stick up for Turkey these days?"

Internally, opposition movements are growing.

In the first act of mass defiance against the purge, thousands have been taking part in a march organised by members of the opposition People's Republican party (CHP) along the 280-mile route from Ankara to Istanbul.

The march is due to finish today with a massive rally in Istanbul's Maltepe district.

"We lost our democracy, and we are on the streets to demand it back," 22-year-old Mehmet Altan, one of the protesters, told the Telegraph.

Those who had cheered on the coup's failure last summer, including Mr Altan, now find themselves filled with regret.

"We were so fearful of what could have been, but we should have been afraid of what we already had," lamented the student.