

Why is Uganda moving slow on FETO?

Shortly after the first-ever Presidential visit from Turkey to Uganda in 2016 - when the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was preparing to host his Ugandan counterpart in Ankara - the Republic of Turkey experienced one of the most shocking events in its recent history.

On July 15-16, the world watched in horror with its breath held on social media, as an attempted military coup was shown from the beginning to the end.

Orchestrated and executed by the Gülen movement's Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) that has been engaged in a struggle against the government since 2013, its followers within the armed forces used lethal force against civilians; tanks rolled down city streets, fighter jets bombed the Turkish Parliament, the Presidential Complex, the National Intelligence Organization and Turkish National Police departments. It also attempted to assassinate President Erdoğan. He then addressed his countrymen via Facetime on live TV and called on all citizens to take to the streets. Civilians were gunned down by soldiers on the Bosphorus Bridge. The coup failed, but still, 251 civilian demonstrators were killed and 2,193 others injured.

Turkey and Uganda established diplomatic ties more than 50 years ago and enjoy good bilateral relations. FETO rode on this opportunity and the sympathy of the Turkish people to mobilize resources and establish its base in Uganda, where it runs schools and hospitals among others.

Although some FETO-linked infrastructures in Uganda have been incapacitated, sources have indicated that one of Uganda's big private hospitals in Kampala, that was established in 2019, is run by one of the FETO fugitives who fled Turkey after the coup attempt and whose assets were frozen in Turkey. Another FETO-affiliated private hospital is also said to operate in Jinja, Eastern Uganda, as well as some schools within the country.

Five years after the failed coup, it is safe to say that the Ugandan government has not moved fast enough to raise the red flag on all of FETO's activities in its country.

What's keeping Uganda?

FETO targeted the core of people's needs. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of 6 and 11 are out of school, with only 8.2 per cent of the population have gone to university or technical school, the lowest participation rate in the world.

It is widely accepted that most of Africa's education and training programs suffer from low-quality teaching and learning, as well as inequalities and exclusion at all levels. Even with a substantial increase in the number of children with access to basic education, many of them still remain out of school.

Although Afghanistan is named as the worst performing country for primary school enrolment, but the six next most unequal countries are all in Africa – the Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Guinea, Eritrea and Ivory Coast. Generally, there is a large gap in Africa's education and this gap will never be closed unless the root cause of the problem - access and quality - is addressed.

It is such demands that provide the fertile ground for strategic investment like FETO did in areas of education and health, riding on the sympathy of the generous Turkish people to mobilize resources and spread them abroad. Prior to July 15 2016, FETO had 63 educational institutions across Africa, providing finance and human resources to the organization. In some countries, these institutions remain active, while elsewhere they are sprawling up. It is not clear how these institutions are running incognito.

In response, the Turkish government established the MAARIF foundation to replace FETO-linked schools abroad in the wake of the failed coup attempt. It has since opened representative offices in 52 countries and operates in 67 countries as a result of official contacts with 104 countries in consultation with relevant ministries and other state institutions. It has also deciphered FETO's education network and locked out the organization's control of schools one by one through transfers, closures, nationalizations or sales to third countries.

Besides inheriting FETO-related educational institutions, new schools have been opened in order to create alternative schools to address the educational needs of the citizens. The MAARIF Foundation has opened 129 new schools in 26 countries, including the United States, Afghanistan, Albania, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, Djibouti, Gambia, Ghana, South Africa, Georgia, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of the Congo, Kosovo, Hungary, Madagascar, Macedonia, Mauritania, Pakistan, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somali Federation, Tanzania and Tunisia. It has also signed 79 different protocols in 45 countries for the transfer of FETO schools and the opening of new schools, while some countries have voluntarily closed them instead of handing them over.

Although Uganda and several other African countries have explicitly pronounced that they don't support FETO and any other terrorist organizations that destabilize Turkey, given the health and education challenges on the continent and the challenge to educate the rapidly growing young population, it is unlikely that countries like Uganda will move swiftly to close their doors on infrastructures that are trying to close their education gap.

What can be done in Africa in particular is for the Turkish government to close FETO infrastructures and replace them with alternatives that will not create a vacuum once FETO stops operations.

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