

Turkey in a Tailspin: The Foiled Coup Attempt of July 15 - The Future, AKP and power

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The epic blunder of the military coup attempt on July 15 has sent Turkey into a tailspin. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the prime minister and cabinet, the parliament, the top military brass, the intelligence community and the police all became aware of the plot at the same time as ordinary Turkish citizens—after it got underway. The president and his team have conceded a massive intelligence failure. Unable to reach the head of the armed forces or the chief of the National Intelligence Agency, Turkey's political leaders were spared death or arrest thanks purely to the gross incompetence of the would-be coup makers. The plotters failed to shut down broadcast media, Internet and social media, so that Erdoğan was able to get a message out to his supporters using FaceTime. And the putschists lacked widespread support inside the armed forces or among the public. All three of the major opposition parties denounced the coup immediately.

There are conflicting rumors as to whether the National Intelligence Agency chief, Hakan Fidan, a confidant of the president, abysmally failed or, as some have suggested, helped to foil the coup by compelling the plotters to stage their effort prematurely. Ironically, Fidan's position was strengthened in 2012 as part of Erdoğan's attempt to beef up the Agency so as not to be caught off guard by a military coup.

For his part, Erdoğan has pointed a finger of ferocious blame at a group of mid-ranking officers loyal to US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen's conservative-nationalist transnational movement, which is called Hizmet (Service) by its adherents. Since 2013 the president and top officials of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have labeled their former friends, the Gülenists, as a "parallel state," "parallelists" (paralelciler) and the "Gülenist terror organization." Since July 15, the AKP luminaries have come up with an array of additional insults to sling at their fellow Islamists—a "malignant cancer," a "greater terror threat than ISIS," "infidels," "traitors," "hypocrites," "brainless creatures," "robots" and a "virus" that must be exterminated at all costs.

Without Precedent

In the past, when confronted with liberal-secular demonstrations like the 2013 Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan insinuated that he could appeal to his followers to take to the streets but would refrain from doing so since he was mindful of their overwhelming numbers. This time, with the coup attempt underway, he asked his conservative Muslim supporters to mount rallies and stand in the path of tanks. Moreover, in what was no small feat, he persuaded the Directorate of Religious Affairs, a state agency, to ask its preachers to recite prayers from loudspeakers of mosques urging the faithful to join the marches against the coup attempt and affirm their support for the government. Such events have never happened before in Turkey: Neither has a democratic popular resistance risen up against a coup, nor have religious leaders urged on a popular mobilization with resort to religious referents, not even under a government with religious leanings like the AKP's.

What is more historic still is that never before have a coup attempt and the popular protests against it been turned into vehicles for a mean-spirited revanchism of inconceivable dimensions—a revanchism that aims not just to root out “the virus” that allegedly caused a terribly botched coup attempt costing 246 innocent lives, but also to crush all perceived opposition and critical thinking coming from liberal, left-wing, right-wing and democratic platforms.

The staggering official figures tell the unprecedented story: According to the Ministry of Interior, the death toll of the coup attempt includes 246 citizens and 24 coup planners. On July 30 Erdoğan stated that a total of 18,699 people, 10,000 of them military personnel, have been detained on suspicion of involvement. In addition, 47,188 civilian employees have been fired from a wide range of jobs in various government departments, including agencies that bear no relevance to coup planning, such as Turkish Airlines, the City Theater of Istanbul, the Tobacco and Alcohol Regulation Agency, the Directorate of Statistics, the Directorate of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Family. The thousands sacked include prosecutors, judges, policemen, journalists and academics—it is difficult to imagine them having an inkling of the plot, either. Add the closure of 1,000 schools, 15 universities, 35 hospitals, 1,200 foundations and media outlets funded by Gülenists, and the sheer scale of Turkey's political tsunami becomes clear.

Fourteen days after the coup, the general staff of the armed forces announced that 44 percent of all 358 active-duty generals and 157 admirals had been expelled; and that out of 32,189 active officers in four force commands, 1,099 officers and 436 non-commissioned officers had been jailed and 1,500 dishonorably discharged. Those dismissed from public employment and residing in publicly subsidized housing were ordered to move out within two weeks.

In the meantime, a troubling feature of the coup attempt is the lack of solid information: Three weeks and counting since July 15, neither the events that unfolded on the night of the putsch nor the identity of the instigators and their collaborators have been clarified satisfactorily. Not surprisingly, conspiracy theories have found fertile soil in which to grow. The government uniformly promotes one such theory—that the Gülenists hatched the plot with the backing of the CIA and the Obama administration. In the absence of free media, the AKP's accusations hinder any effort to establish the true forces and agendas behind the coup attempt. Instead, the government rhetoric lends respectability to an ongoing push for recrimination. The general outcry at all levels of politics and society demonizing the “terrorist organization” has made it seem as if the case against the Gülenists were open and shut.

In other quarters, including Gülenists themselves, Erdoğan's own description of the coup attempt as “a gift from God,” in the sense that it enabled him to identify and persecute Gülenists in the military, has been taken to mean that the president may have masterminded the plot himself. Selahattin

Demirtaş, the leader of pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), who spoke out against the coup while it was underway, has now made the striking observation that "the discourse that the coup makers have lost and democracy has won is false." [1] He also broached the possibility that the aborted coup attempt was supported by a disgruntled coterie inside the AKP.

What is clear is that the government's pervasive campaign of disinformation masks an unhinged clampdown on a wide spectrum of Erdoğan's opponents.

There is a huge historical irony here: When the tanks were in the streets, Turkey's democrats—liberals, leftists, HDP members and others—shared the joy of protesting against a coup with fellow citizens from all walks of life (despite the religious chants and disapproving looks that disturbed some secular democrats and stylishly dressed young people). Now the democrats are shocked to discover that a normal judicial process to prosecute and convict the coup makers has metamorphosed into something almost out of control. A state of emergency was declared, allowing the government to act speedily against the members of the "Gülen terrorist organization," and which opened up the possibility of suspending basic rights and freedoms by decree. Erdoğan has already started to talk about reinstating the death penalty. Turkey's democrats are legitimately concerned that the government is using the foiled coup as a pretext to eliminate whatever is left of due process, rights and freedoms, diversity and plurality. The president, meanwhile, is using the guise of post-coup restructuring to consolidate his own power even further without political backlash.

Turkey's Critical Mass

A major issue that needs to be factored into any analysis of July 15 is the unequivocal acceptance by the Turkish masses of the Erdoğan regime's utter contempt for the Gülen movement, including the campaign to label it a "terror organization," and the official claim that the CIA supported a Gülenist coup. It seems that the government's strategy of repeatedly disparaging the Gülenists has worked perfectly. All Gülenists are now seen as a threat to national unity and integrity, justifying the mass purge that is taking place.

The popular acceptance of the AKP narrative is also driven by Erdoğan's genuine appeal and his record of improving the political, social and economic status of his conservative, Islam-friendly followers, who historically have been excluded from positions of prestige, prominence and wealth within the secular state. He was able to deliver jobs, housing, education, health care and higher living standards to his constituents, thanks to a fast-growing economy. Erdoğan's genre of divisive politics also played a role in cementing the loyalty of his pious supporters, playing on their insecurity about their newfound middle-class position and the need to guard it from "the others," whoever they may be. Erdoğan's politics, in other words, operates very well in conditions of profound division between his loyalists and the rest of society. The fact that his followers lack empathy for "the others" being subjected to unjust treatment at present is a symptom of that insecurity and the fear of returning to a repressive secular state. The unflinching support for the leader is also a remedy for the impotence many must feel trying to "defend" their precarious status under conditions of constant instability.

This lack of real power intersects with the pervasive absence of either institutionalized checks and balances or a "critical" democratic political culture in Turkish society in general, but particularly among Turkey's historically excluded conservative-nationalist critical mass. That is why it has been fairly easy for the masses to turn a blind eye to the injustices that followed July 15, from tens of thousands losing their livelihood to the lynching of an innocent soldier on the Bosphorus Bridge.

Moreover, opinion leaders in more powerful positions seem to have succumbed, as well. The post-

coup behavior of the secular-modernist TÜSIAD, the Turkish Association of Industrialists and Businessmen, is indicative of a strategy for coping with Erdoğan's divisive leadership style. According to press reports, TÜSIAD, which made and unmade governments in the 1990s, supported the post-coup AKP propaganda machine by funding advertising in four international newspapers that romanticized the role of the street in thwarting the July 15 coup. Gülenists are now presumed by TÜSIAD to embody a new Islamist existential threat, one that overshadows the extrajudicial purges.

It appears that the government is content to withhold information that would clarify the details of what occurred. So many questions remain as of this writing: How many of those detained or arrested officers and civilians were truly involved in the coup attempt? What were their affiliations? How could the coup-making streak in the armed forces reassert itself at a time when the political muscle of the military was widely considered to have weakened? What was the role of the high command in the incident? Were they aware of the coup preparations? If so, why did they not act? If not, then why not? How is it possible that the government produced long lists of thousands of names to be detained and sacked the very next day after the plot failed? How could Turkey's patriotic officer corps, known to be fiercely against the demands for Kurdish independence, which they regard a national security threat, implode at a time when there is a deadly war between security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK?

A Fractured Past

On five occasions in the Turkish republic's past, different echelons of the military have intervened in politics in different ways. Six of the eleven presidents who served before Erdoğan came from military backgrounds. The Turkish general staff has never been as subordinate to civilian rule as its counterparts in Western democracies. The de facto and de jure positions the officers have enjoyed derive from an ideology (Kemalism, so named after the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk), which euphemistically defines the military's role as "guardian," a "ballast" keeping the country on an even keel when it confronts what the armed forces defines as threats—communism, "Islamism," "Kurdish nationalism" or an "overbearing parliament." This last supposed peril is an expression of the army's intense anti-political sentiment, aroused easily by demonstrations of popular will.

Mid-ranking officers seem to have dominated the July 15 attempt, something for which there are a number of unfortunate precedents. The first military intervention of the twentieth century in 1960 was orchestrated by the lower ranks of the officer corps, responding to the last self-defined threat mentioned above, abuses of power by a parliamentary majority. Afterward, however, the military hierarchy was so undermined and the officer corps so intensely politicized that the putsch was followed by two abortive efforts in 1962 and 1963 led by Col. Talat Aydemir, mobilizing almost exclusively the cadets of the war college that he commanded. The first time Aydemir was granted a pardon; the second time he was executed.

The second set of precedents are two alleged attempts to overthrow the AKP government that were revealed by the media in 2007, nipped in the bud and taken to civilian courts in 2008 and 2010. These coup conspiracy cases are called Ergenekon and Balyoz, respectively. Involving the arrest of more than 10 percent of generals and admirals, the prosecution of the two cases included defendants who ranged from top brass (including a former chief of general staff, a former secretary general of the National Security Council and force commanders) to active-duty and retired junior officers, Kemalist journalists and professors. The accused conspirators received heavy penalties, including life sentences. As on July 15, the two purported coups were planned outside the chain of command, but by an ironic stroke of fate, according to the current widespread consensus, it was the

Gülenist members of the police and military, the officially declared culprits of today, who helped to reveal the plots and reinforce the AKP's authority against the Kemalist factions in the military.

The camaraderie between Gülen and Erdoğan ran so deep at the time that the AKP itself placed Gülenists highly in the police, judiciary, government bureaucracies, military schools and intelligence agencies. [2] Today's poisonous divide emerged after December 17, 2013, when Gülen's supporters in the police and judiciary instigated an anti-corruption operation against Erdoğan, then prime minister, as well as his family members and some of his cabinet ministers. On February 24 of the next year, someone posted to YouTube audio recordings in which voices identified as those of Erdoğan and his son are clearly heard talking about how to hide large sums of money. Erdoğan admitted his phone was tapped, but insisted the tapes were a doctored montage. He must have felt betrayed by his erstwhile friend Fethullah Gülen on a very personal level: At that point, Turkish politics plunged off the deep end, with Erdoğan vowing to cleanse the government of the "parallel" elements of the "Gülenist terror organization" and commencing his tenacious pursuit of an "imperial presidency" after stepping down as prime minister.

The collapse of the AKP-Gülen alignment paved the way for the acquittal and release of hundreds of Ergenekon-Balyoz defendants in 2015 and 2016. Erdoğan and AKP officials, after having defended the investigations, trials and convictions, now claimed that Gülen's followers had framed these officers and shifted toward a more nationalist, anti-Kurdish and statist policy fully aligned with the army.

The AKP's Understanding of Control of the Military

The 1960 coup, Talat Aydemir's coup attempt and the Ergenekon-Balyoz cases all reveal a durable reality about the Turkish military: The apparent unity and coherence of the command structure disguises considerable insubordination and internal hostility. The chief of staff, Gen. Hulusi Akar, embarrassingly misjudged the rank and file when he said three months prior to July 15 that there would be no illegal actions in the armed forces outside his chain of command. [3]

Historically, what has shaped the high command's behavior has been the model of civil-military interaction chosen by the elected civilian authority. The model chosen by the AKP governments has suffered a severe blow.

During the AKP's first years in office, the military evinced great animosity for the party. It was abundantly clear to party leaders that the officer corps had to be brought under civilian control. The European Union's decision to extend candidate status to Turkey provided the opportunity. Its accession conditions required Turkey to bring its military affairs and security culture into line with EU best practices. The AKP initiated a series of reforms, beginning with the "democracy package" of August 7, 2003, a distinct legislative accomplishment. This legislation converted the National Security Council (NSC) to an advisory body, repealing its executive powers, which had overlapped with or even superseded those of the prime minister and cabinet. Then the Ergenekon-Balyoz cases helped the government to clear a psychological threshold in standing up to the military's heavy-handedness. More landmark legislation was passed, and the armed forces finally seemed subordinate to the civilian government. Civilian authorities got involved in appointments, promotions and dismissals of officers; officers no longer visibly perceived themselves as above the law; and the chances of a coup seemed to evaporate.

Or so it seemed, until the initial euphoria about the prospects for EU membership gave way to gloom. The EU was airing complaints about the AKP's weakening resolve to reform as early as 2005, in annual progress reports pointing at problem areas like human rights. Increasing European

reluctance to go ahead with accession talks bolstered an inward-looking conservative nationalism within the AKP long before the current problems with the EU related to the Syrian war and refugee crisis emerged. It became clear that Ergenekon-Balyoz would cut both ways, producing on the one hand a positive impetus for reform, and on the other hand a policy shift so negative that it created the underlying conditions for the abortive July 15 coup.

Single-Party Model of Control

For the Ergenekon-Balyoz trials also convinced the government that the only sure way to establish workable control over the officer corps was to appoint a “personally loyal” top brass that would call the shots. In light of this belief, the military reform process became tenuous and partial. Institutional reforms were shelved, including plans to make the general staff responsible to the minister of defense, to staff the ministry with civilians, to establish parliamentary scrutiny of arms spending and the military’s budget, extra-budgetary funds and educational autonomy, and to empower the parliament and civilian bureaucracy in defense-related planning.

The slowdown made sense to the AKP in the zeitgeist of 2011, when the party had just won its third consecutive general election with 49 percent of the popular vote. Ebullient after its string of victories, and soured on the EU, the government shifted its policies further right, working to consolidate power, to tamper with institutions of checks and balances, and to eliminate sources of dissent. The new rapprochement between Erdoğan and the highest military ranks after the falling-out with the Gülenists was another factor making the government overconfident that the army was under control. I myself wrote in 2014 that “much of what goes on under the name of normalizing civil-military relations in Turkey is actually a strategy to sate the growing appetite of the ruling class for power without having to live in the shadows of a power-hungry military.” [4]

Non-democratic regimes often try to coopt the top brass as a method of civilian control—a golden reminder that while all forms of democratic control over the military are civilian, not all forms of civilian control are democratic. Erdoğan’s system of civil-military relations turns back the clock to Turkey’s single-party era, when presidents Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Ismet İnönü entrusted the position of chief of general staff to Marshal Fevzi Çakmak, a loyal colleague, much respected and feared in the army, to rule other officers with an iron fist for 23 years. Gens. Necdet Özel (2011-2015) and Hulusi Akar (2015-present) have seemed willing to play the same role for the AKP. In return, the government gave carte blanche to the high command to manage its internal affairs free from civilian oversight, paid good salaries and increased the fringe benefits of army personnel.

But interviews with former generals and admirals who were either involved in the Ergenekon trials or resigned in protest of the prosecution show that both Gens. Özel and Akar are deeply disliked because their appointments were based on closeness to Erdoğan rather than merit. These harsh critics point to Akar’s controversial participation in Erdoğan’s daughter’s wedding and his son-in-law’s business dealings. [5] There are reports that an aide-de-camp who served both Erdoğan and Akar and a former air force commander confessed to involvement in the aborted coup (though their battered faces seen in the media obviously call into question the credibility of any such confession). These accounts nonetheless lend support to the claim made by Ilker Başbuğ, another former chief of general staff and Ergenekon convict, that the high command has a “competence” problem and that the government’s trust in Akar to keep the rank and file “quiet” is misplaced. [6]

Perhaps the only silver lining in the cloud of Erdoğan’s system of “control by cooptation” is the seeming inability of scheming junior and mid-level officers to win over senior officers who are happy with the favors the government has meted out to the army.

Three Cliques

Those who have, in the middle of the post-coup havoc, found the time to study the backgrounds of the generals and admirals allegedly involved in the July 15 attempt have come to the conclusion that the coup plotters are made up of three cliques: a dominant faction of mid-ranking officers loyal to Gülen; a group of commanders wavering between active or passive support; and a third opportunistic group that jumped in at the last minute. [7] It seems that about half of the brigadier generals and rear admirals purged after July 15 were promoted to their ranks after the Ergenekon-Balyoz conspiracies between 2007 and 2010, a period when the Gülen-Erdoğan ties were thicker than blood. Add the claim of Başbuğ that not a single Gülenist officer was dismissed from the army between 2002 and 2010, [8] and it seems logical to finger Gülen supporters as the ringleaders.

But is not something amiss in this picture? It is true that the force of Kemalist ideology in society and the military has declined, as it lost its bastions of traditional allies in the judiciary and civilian bureaucracy. The question nonetheless remains whether the “usual suspects”—Kemalist officers—pitched in to aid an operation that the whole country is made to believe is Gülenist-led. The prime minister, who for obvious reasons wants to reduce the number of fronts on which the government is fighting, categorically rejected the notion of Kemalist involvement in the foiled coup. [9] There are, however, independent researchers on Turkey who propose that “the coup may have been carried out by an unholy alliance between a faction of old-school Kemalists and Gülenist officers.” [10] The facts about what happened are still elusive.

The Future

Moving quickly and unpredictably, the government has already started a radical revamping of the military's institutional bases. There is no doubt that the government wants to shift the civil-military balance in its favor. It is normal, of course, for a constitutionally elected government to establish the principle of civilian supremacy. But there is little to suggest that, in this regard, the AKP government intends to restart the EU-inspired reforms it abandoned in the wake of Ergenekon-Balyoz. Rather, Erdoğan is using the crisis as a justification for taking direct control over the general staff and National Intelligence Agency; closing military academies; bringing the gendarmerie under fuller civilian control; and equipping police with heavy weaponry (along the militarized model of major US cities), as the minister of interior promised on July 28. It seems that the president's heart is in a project of transforming the military into a source of personal power as he resumes pursuing his goal of an executive presidency by, if necessary, calling for new elections to solidify the AKP's parliamentary majority.

On the military's side, the turbulent aftermath of July 15 represents a major setback for the internal cohesion, professionalism, self-esteem and social prestige of the armed forces, not to mention their operational capabilities. It is not clear at all that Turkey's civil-military relations can be normalized.

In the wake of the coup attempt, the US likely believes its main interest lies in ensuring that the alliance between the two nations' militaries through NATO remains workable. Ankara's engagement with its neighbors to the south and east, including Syria, Iran and the Kurds; the refugee crisis; the fight against ISIS; and Erdoğan's parley with Russia all figure in a calculus by which strong ties with Turkey mean silence about its domestic travails.

But the rules of the political game in Ankara tell a different story to those whose understanding of democracy is more comprehensive than just opposing coups. Consumed with despair that the July 15 incident is evolving into something more profound than a contest with an “enemy,” these observers

think that Turkey's stability and regional role ultimately depend on the quality of the country's own political principles and the democratic character of its regime. There is too much unharnessed power in Turkey, too fierce a glint in the ruling party's eyes and too much acquiescence on the part of the populace. It is a dangerous combination.

Ümit Cizre

Endnotes

[1] Cumhuriyet, July 26, 2016.

[2] A prominent founding member of the AKP who is now a deputy of the pro-Kurdish HDP, Mir Dengir Fırat, admits this fact in a recent interview. Cumhuriyet, July 21, 2016.

[3] Sabah, April 1, 2016.

[4] Ümit Cizre, "Two Views on Turkey's Military," Turkish Review 4/2 (2014), p. 639.

[5] See the interview with a former admiral, Nusret Güner, on the news site T24, May 23, 2016.

[6] Hürriyet, August 2, 2016.

[7] Institute of Studies on War (London), "Partial Assessment of Turkey's Post-Coup Attempt at Military Purge," July 22, 2016; Kadri Gürsel, "Turkey's Failed Coup Reveals 'Army Within Army,'" Al-Monitor, July 22, 2016; and Hürriyet, August 2, 2016.

[8] Hürriyet, August 2, 2016.

[9] Hürriyet, August 2, 2016.

[10] Svante Cornell, "A Botched Coup and Turkey's Descent Into Madness," Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies (Brussels), July 19, 2016.

P.S.

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<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero081016>