

# **Turkey was already undergoing a slow-motion coup - by Erdoğan, not the army. Aftermath of coup attempt will be bloody and repressive**

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**For the last three years, the Turkish president has been methodically moving to take over the nodes of power.**

What happens in Turkey matters. It is a G20 economy in a sensitive part of the world, sharing borders with Iraq, Iran and Syria. Turkey is an asset to its Nato partners when it is able to exercise a leadership role. It can be a liability when its own problems – like the tension with its Kurdish population – spill over those frontiers. And it can be a millstone around the world's neck when it decides, as it did on Friday, to self-harm.

The coup attempt that night was, by any account, a cack-handed affair. It was an attempt to grab the reins of a complex society with the almost quaintly antediluvian tactics of seizing the state television station and rolling some tanks on to the streets. It is as if the plotters had never heard of social media, while the Turkish president himself addressed his supporters via FaceTime, urging them out on the streets. Crowds played chicken with the putschists, betting they would return to their barracks rather than have the streets run red with blood. Even then, at least 180 people – civilians, police and coup makers – died.

Indeed, the question is less why the coup failed than why it was ever carried out. If it had an air of amateur desperation, it is because its perpetrators probably assumed that this was their last chance to stop the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from getting the military completely under its control. At the beginning of August, the military high council will meet, as it does every year, to consider who gets promoted, retired or pushed aside. In the last few days, the pro-government press has been more than hinting that a spring cleaning of the ranks is long overdue.

Indeed, many would argue that Turkey was already in the throes of a slow motion coup d'état, not by the military but by Erdoğan himself. For the last three years, he has been moving, and methodically, to take over the nodes of power.

The pressures on the media have been well documented, as the country slides in international ratings by organisations such as Freedom House, from partly free to not free at all. Opposition newspapers have been taken over by court-appointed administrators. Dissident television stations have had the plug pulled from satellites; digital platforms are no longer seen in people's homes. Erdoğan curses the very social media which this weekend helped to save his skin.

Increasingly, the government has put the judiciary under its thumb. It is now a brave judge who rules in a way he knows will give official offence. So while the Turkish parliament congratulated

itself on a long night's defence of democracy, many wonder why its members connived in the decline of the rule of law.

And still Erdoğan craves greater authority. Last May, he discarded one prime minister in favour of another more sympathetic to his plans to change the parliamentary system into a strong executive presidency. When the coup plotters stand trial, they may suffer the additional indignation of seeing their attempts to put Erdoğan in his place backfire, by providing a mandate for such increased powers. The president has already promised a purge of those still connected to the exiled dissident cleric Fethullah Gülen – Erdoğan speak for anyone who opposes his will.

To the outside world, this spectacle should cause dismay. Turkish ambitions to project power, to assist in the fight against Islamic State, to help forge a settlement in Syria will be much harder to realise if the government is at war with its own military and the army at war with itself. A Turkey that governs through consensus is the more valuable ally. The Turkish economy, too, will be more buoyant if relieved of the weight of political risk.

The lesson of the failed coup is that Turkey needs a leader who can bring different sides of a divided society together – or at the very least, one who is willing to try.

**Andrew Finkel**

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## **Aftermath of Turkey coup attempt will be bloody and repressive**

**Mob rule will shape country's politics as attacks on anyone seen to oppose Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party continue.**

The attempted military coup in Turkey on Friday sent shockwaves through the country and international community. Aimed at toppling Turkey's strongman president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development party (AKP), the failed uprising threw a spotlight on a deeply divided country embroiled in war at home and abroad.

Turkey is no stranger to military coups, it has undergone four since 1960. Its powerful military has historically regarded itself as the protector of the modern Turkish state and the vision of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It has also devoted itself to Atatürk's nationalistic and secularist vision, as well as bringing order to the country. The constitutional, historical and cultural basis for its actions has generated resentment and hostility. The army has often abused its powers and has a history of repression and human rights abuses.

When Erdoğan came to power in 2002, one of his immediate priorities was to counter the military. He pursued closer ties with the EU and sought to expand his influence within the country's institutions. In 2008, the military was severely weakened by Erdoğan in what became known as the Ergenekon affair, a series of trials in which military officers, journalists and politicians were accused of forming a clandestine organisation that plotted against the civilian government. It resulted in

prison sentences for senior military members and weakened, if not ended, the military's capacity to conduct coups as it had done in the past.

In other words, Erdoğan set himself up for another clash with the military, but few expected it to come so soon or in the form of an attempted coup. The most astonishing thing about Friday's events was that the coup was even contemplated by military factions, given Erdoğan's grip on the country. Friday's coup attempt was by far Turkey's least effective. The military did not control the media and lacked sufficient support both within its ranks and on the streets. It also signified that Erdoğan's divide-and-rule policies have worked; that he has tamed Turkey's once-feared military.

However, it should not have been surprising that a move to oust Erdoğan has occurred. In recent years, Erdoğan has alienated rivals and exacerbated Turkey's instability for his personal gain. He has exploited ethnic and sectarian tensions, restarted a domestic war with the Kurds and sought to divide the population to garner greater constitutional powers. Erdoğan's dangerous games has brought levels of violence and instability not seen in Turkey for decades.

As with many coups around the world, the aftermath will be bloody and repressive. It will be rule of the mob, rather than rule of law that will shape Turkish politics and society. More than 1,000 members of the military have been arrested and more than 2,000 judges have been laid off. Pro-government mobs have brutally attacked anyone they perceive as being anti-Erdoğan or anti-government. Darker days lie ahead for Turkey.

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