

# **Failed coup attempt in Turkey: the victory of democracy? - “The opportunity to break the rise of authoritarianism was lost after the June 7 2015 elections”**

Saturday 23 July 2016, by [GAMBETTI Zeynep](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2016).

## **Who was the aggressor and who the victim? Who was protecting whom? From whom?**

In the early hours of July 16, a handful of soldiers had stopped CNN Turk from broadcasting. Civilian crowds gathered outside the studios to protest. When the soldiers finally surrendered, police officers loyal to the AKP government were overwhelmed, unable to control the mob and protect the soldiers from being lynched. This shows how the fine lines between perpetrator and victim, state authority and mob power were effaced that night. Who was the aggressor and who the victim? Who was protecting whom? From whom?

The same questions may indeed be posed concerning the coup attempt itself. As soon as the Bosphorus bridge was shut to traffic by a couple of military vehicles late on Friday, the Prime Minister identified the event as “a rebellion by a faction of the army.” For those having witnessed the 1980 and 1997 coups, it was clear that this was indeed a faction; otherwise all main streets would be swarming with tanks. But just as soon, social media users asked whether the coup was genuine or a set-up by the AKP to increase President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s popularity. The crucial question, then, is whether or not this marks the victory of democratic forces in Turkey.

There was speculation that the government was already informed of the attempt but chose to let it happen. The Turkish secret services were said to have leaked the list of officers to be purged from the army this August so as to force them into engaging in a last-resort kamikaze attempt to avoid imprisonment. Erdoğan’s calling the coup a “blessing to clean the army” of subversive elements further fueled suspicions. The whearabouts of F-16 fighter jets that allegedly threatened Erdoğan’s private plane and flew menacingly over the megapolises of Istanbul and Ankara is still unknown. Thus, at the same time as the coup was being covered live in the media, credulity and incredulity melded to efface once again the fine line between truth and deception.

The reason why the coup (which was a genuine one) did but did not come as a surprise is that the AKP has been preparing the public to expect a coup for a decade. Major purges were undertaken since 2012 among army ranks to eliminate would-be coup plotters. The irony is that the Fethullah Gülen movement [1], allegedly behind this last putsch, was AKP’s ally at the time and helped replace purged officers with pro-government ones, including its own adepts. When Gülen fell out of grace, his followers were suspected of forming a “parallel state” to oust the AKP. Initially intended to curb the power of the Armed Forces in Turkey and rid state institutions of their dogmatic secular bias, the AKP-Gülen alliance disintegrated into a politics of suspicion. The term “coup” was associated with diverse events, such as Occupy Gezi or a series of corruption charges against AKP ministers and Erdoğan’s own son in 2013.

It has become customary to look for a hidden reason behind every legal or administrative move made by public authorities: is it Gülen's men blocking Erdoğan or the other way around? Indeed, the 15 July coup is the culmination of a state of exception that has become the rule. Trust in public institutions, officials and discourses has vastly eroded as a consequence of power struggles, covert operations, and murky objectives. Erdoğan's unhindered accumulation of all powers in his person was made largely possible by this schism that not only polarizes public opinion, but also foments paranoia and insecurity.

The coup attempt left more than 160 dead and thousands wounded in a single night, but found virtually no basis of support in society. The only positive note to be made in its regard is that no part of Turkey's splintered ideological landscape seems to desire a coup anymore. This was certainly not the case when the AKP came to power in 2002; Republicans have always seen the Armed Forces as the guarantor of the secular regime. Last week, civilian crowds braved heavy artillery to take to the streets and succeeded in halting the advance of the putschists. The crucial question, then, is whether or not this marks the victory of democratic forces in Turkey.

## **What is democracy?**

There is evidently much to celebrate when civilians risk their lives to confront armies. From Tiananmen to Tahrir, the collective aspiration to determine one's own fate is a democratic one, not in the procedural but in the substantial sense. A putsch is first and foremost a blow to such an aspiration; it negates freedom and self-rule much more than the law. But the messiness of the last coup in Turkey – a mirror-image of the messiness of the political scene – demands the exercise of caution when using concepts as abstract as “democracy.”

The people did take to the streets, but only when prompted by Erdoğan, the authoritarian but charismatic leader he is known to be, and after realizing that this wasn't a full-fledged coup. Erdoğan's call was accompanied by the sound of muezzins the whole night who, using the network of loudspeakers on minarets, incited people to protect the president and government in the name of Allah and the Koran. Crowds chanted “Allah-u akbar” when forcing the tanks to retreat. Then came the excesses and the official endorsement (notably, by the Prime Minister) of the “people's willingness to go as far as to want to lynch the putshists.” The appeal to the “will of the people,” embodied by Erdoğan himself as an elected president, was merged with the demand to save the AKP from the Gülenists. It is less than clear whether the mobs beating soldiers on the streets were “protecting democracy” or their Leader, the Homeland, and AKP's cause. The call for mobilization continues, with reports that mobs have attacked Alewi and Syrian neighborhoods in various parts of the country. It is less than clear whether the mobs beating soldiers on the streets were “protecting democracy” or their Leader, the Homeland, and AKP's cause.

In Turkey, “democracy” tends to be equated with majoritarianism, and a quasi-Orwellian logic of reversibility undergirds the hollowing out of universal principles. Erdoğan's rhetorical capacity to turn every universal into a particular and vice versa plays a significant role here. Yesterday's ally can become today's enemy, a legitimate democratic demand may be discredited on grounds that it is being made in bad faith, and an outright violation of the law by the government itself can be disguised as the very requirement of regime stability or national prosperity. Championed as the embodiment of “real democracy” (as opposed to the restrained field of rights and liberties under Republican rule), the AKP turned out just as bad in terms of its human rights record. All types of opposition or dissidence may be delegitimized through partisan and affective discourse. The government's habit of disrespecting legal stipulations and court decisions in the name of the “will of the people” warps the process of democratization in alarming ways.

Local and international analysts [2] express their fear that the failure of the putsch will further block the chances of recuperating what remains of Turkey's institutions. Indeed, in addition to nearly 3000 rank officers and soldiers who have been rounded up for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government, almost 3000 judges and prosecutors (including two members of the Constitutional Court) were either taken under custody or suspended from duty the day after the coup attempt. They are charged with siding with Gülen although, ironically, the AKP was once largely supportive of and benefited from their presence in the judiciary. They have now become obstacles in the government's desire to have full control over the functioning of the courts. What's more, the Higher Education Council is to convene the rectors of all of Turkey's universities next week to enlist their collaboration in the witch hunt against Gülenist academics. The sheer enormity of these purges shows how Erdoğan is poised to honor his promise of clamping down with more fervor on the "parallel state", using the defense of democracy as a justification.

Can Dündar, a journalist under trial [3] for revealing a shipment of arms to rebel groups in Syria in trucks belonging to the Turkish secret services, correctly remarked in a tweet that military coups have always backfired in terms of their political intent in Turkish history. Coups reinforce civilian authoritarianism instead of promoting the demand for rights and liberties. The 1980 coup carried the catch-all party leader Turgut Özal first to prime ministry and then to presidency. The ultimatum issued by the Armed Forces in 2007 to intimidate the AKP resulted in the presidency of Abdullah Gül, one of the founders of the party and Erdoğan's former confidant. The July 15 coup is likely to open the way for the abolition of the parliamentary regime in favor of a presidential one, minus the system of checks and balances on executive powers. This is what Erdoğan has been pushing for anyway.

One thing is clear: the Turkish political scene is moving towards a single-party rule. This is the politics of the ballot, where legitimacy as well as permissiveness is obtained from the mere fact of being elected. Without veritable debate, participation, or respect for minority opinion, political practices and discourses leave few options of exit: the electorate must either support the AKP or bear the burden of complicity in ploys to destabilize the country, negate national will, and hinder economic development. Antagonisms fueled by the government regularly metamorphose into the logic of warfare, and one can then kill with impunity.

The devastating coup of 1980, more than forty years of war with the Kurds, and the AKP's blatant use of religious and patriotic discourse as an excuse to quash rivals, muzzle the media, intimidate academia, and thwart all other potential obstacles to its political ambitions, have made moral panics quite frequent. The "people's" will to stand against riot police or army units that shoot down civilians vanishes as soon as the latter are protestors at Gezi Park or Kurdish citizens, to cite but two major cases. Antagonisms fueled by the government regularly metamorphose into the logic of warfare, and one can then kill with impunity. The militaristic cult of martyrdom that permeates Turkish society sublimates the idea of sacrificing one's life for a "sacred cause" – among which is also the protection of the AKP. Especially striking is how nearly a year of curfew imposed intermittently on several towns in the Kurdish provinces of southeastern Turkey [4], and the firing of mortar into heavily populated neighborhoods, has failed to incite indignation in the rest of the country. One must also note that in addition to the AKP's mastery of populist rhetoric, the demolition of urban spaces and livelihoods in the Kurdish region was carried out with the benediction of the US and EU, who endorse Turkey's "right to fight terrorism" – a perfect smokescreen for human rights violations.

To be precise, the opportunity to break the rise of authoritarianism was lost after the June 7 2015 elections [5]. Present electoral politics is not based on the respect for rights, liberties, and the rule of law, nor on the aspiration to open up spaces for the accommodation of differences and participation in decision-making. It is based merely on the will of the majority – and of the Leader

who incorporates it. Comments by analysts that liken the bombardment of Parliament on the night of the coup to the Reichstag fire may not be totally rash [6]. The AKP establishment also thinks Parliament is redundant and that a popularly elected president would be enough to make Turkey a democracy. As my colleague Albenaz Azmanova put it, “we are witnessing, yet again, the paradoxical sacrifice of democracy at democracy’s altar – something that the European twentieth century had mastered to perfection, before it gave the false promise of ‘never again’.”

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\* Gambetti Z.(2016) Failed coup attempt in Turkey: the victory of democracy?, Open Democracy / ISA RC-47: Open Movements, 18 July.

<https://opendemocracy.net/zeynep-gambetti/failed-coup-attempt-in-turkey-victory-of-democracy>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/16/fethullah-gulen-who-is-the-man-blamed-by-turkeys-president-for-coup-attempt>

[2] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/16/opinions/turkey-coup-attempt-white/index.html>

[3] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/emma-daly/holding-wake-for-turkish-press>

[4] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/11/turkey-state-blocks-probes-southeast-killings>

[5] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/dimitar-bechev-nathalie-tocci/what-next-in-turkey>

[6] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ay-e-kad-o-lu/coup-d-tat-attempt-turkey-s-reichstag-fire>