

In Brief: In addition to undermining the integrity of Turkey's fledgling democracy, both the July 2016 coup and the government's response to it have generated problems. First, there is no question that the military purges have reduced the combat readiness of the Turkish military, at a time when Turkey is engaged militarily in Syria. Second, an impression that the rule of law is eroding has taken hold, which is already proving problematic in relations with the EU. Third, some MPs have asked that the AKParty cleanse itself of Gülenists. If allowed to proceed, feuds may break out in the party. Fourth, while the alleged Gülenist conspiracy has reduced the tensions between government and the opposition CHP and MHP, this may be temporary. Fifth, the government has linked Kurdish terror with the Gülenists. Sixth, Impatience with the U.S. judicial process regarding the extradition of Fethullah Gülen himself may produce an outcome that will only inflict greater damage on the already turbulent Turkish-U.S. relationship. Finally, as the anti-Gülenist campaign continues, more people may question how the government could have been deceived for so long.

Saving Democracy Through Non-Democratic Means

by Ilter Turan

The attempted military coup on the night of July 15, 2016 came as a surprise to most Turks. While legal and institutional changes had gradually reduced the military's political power in favor of civilian control during the course of Justice and Development Party (AKParty) rule, neither the political class nor average citizens expected another military takeover. They may be forgiven for their optimism, since the circumstances of this attempt differed from that of earlier occasions in major ways.

The Coup Shock and Emergency Rule

There was a routine to earlier military interventions. They would be preceded by an erosion of national political consensus, an outbreak of continual violence, the decline of faith in the ability of bickering politicians to address the crisis, a growth in citizen expectations that only the military could restore law and order, military pronouncements that politicians should put their house in order, and finally the military takeover. This time, although Turkey's politics were also highly polarized, and there were occasional acts of urban terrorism and a fight against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in the country's southeast, there was no feeling that the military could do more than what was already being done. Furthermore, the economy had performed reasonably well over the last decade.

Poorly planned and implemented, the coup encountered the resistance of the public, political parties, and a majority in the military. The country first went into deep shock, then relief, and finally rejoicing as it became clear that the coup had failed. From the beginning, parliamentary parties supported the government and confirmed their opposition to military rule. Suddenly the political atmosphere in the country was transformed. The polarized rhetoric of politics was replaced by moderation and a mood of cooperation. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım made gestures to the opposition. The president advised the state broadcasting company to allocate more time to reporting about the major opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), while the prime minister incorporated some demands of opposition parties into bills that would soon come to the floor of parliament. Under the circumstances, despite the opposition of the Republican People's Party (RPP) and the People's Democratic Party (HDP), the proposed state of emergency easily cleared the parliament.

The Challenge of the Gülenists

The government had insisted on emergency powers in order to cleanse Turkish state institutions of elements of the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), which it held responsible for the failed coup. Also called Gülenists (a reference to the spiritual leader of the religious order that was alleged to have initiated the coup, who has lived in Pennsylvania since 1999), the perpetrators were comprised of military, security, and police officers, provincial and sub-provincial governors, bureaucrats in various ministries, businessmen, university professors, high school teachers, members of the press and media, and civil society leaders. In contrast to other religious orders that have concentrated their efforts mainly in the spiritual domain, the Gülenists had developed a network of high schools, universities, college preparatory programs, hospitals, businessmen's associations, and business enterprises including a bank, newspapers, radio and television

stations, foundations, and charities. More like an elite movement, it was known that they wanted to place their followers in government service, notably in critical areas like the Ministry of Interior, the security services, the police, and the judiciary. There was little awareness that they had also made deep inroads into the military.

The confessions of coup participants confirm allegations made earlier, typically by secularist associations and occasionally by bureaucrats, that there was a systematic effort to take over various government agencies, known in Turkish as "the institutions of the state." Unlawful means were sometimes employed, such as stealing the answers to competitive public service entry exams (Ministry of Interior, security services, police, and the judiciary) and school admission exams (military high schools, colleges, and staff colleges) and passing them to Gülenist candidates. Those that had already entered the system would support newcomers and insure their favored treatment.

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After the rise of the AKParty, a symbiotic alliance was forged between it and the Gülenists. The AKParty needed well-trained people to fill bureaucratic positions while the Gülenists wanted to enter and rise in public service. Although the cadres of the two groups cooperated, they seem to have retained their identity and keep their distance, often resulting in competitive behavior. The Gülenists appear to have planned to take control over the Turkish political system in several stages. The first critical stage was weakening the institutional power of the military. This was achieved through a series of trials of top military leaders, including many retired

officers, who were accused of coup plotting. Through a series of cases during which the maladministration of justice was only too apparent, the defendants received severe sentences. Not opposed to the declining power of the military, the government, when facing criticism, argued that justice should run its course. Then in December 2013 came the second stage, in which four government ministers and several high-ranking bureaucrats were charged with corruption. A taped conversation circulating on the internet also implicated then Prime Minister Erdoğan and his family. Erdoğan decided to strike back. He charged that these were manufactured lies were propagated by the Fethullah Terrorist Organization to destabilize Turkey on behalf of “external forces.” The Gülenist bureaucrats, he argued, should be cleansed from government since they were trying to take it over. It is probably at this stage that the government also became aware of Gülenist penetration in the military. It is speculated that the coup was planned to prevent a major purge of Gülenists during the August 2016 meeting of the High Military Council, where the promotions, retirements, and expulsions of officers are decided.

Protecting Democracy Through Non-Democratic Means

Turkish governments are constitutionally empowered to declare a state of emergency for up to six months, inter alia, in the event of an uprising, and then submit it for parliament’s approval. This state of emergency allows the council of ministers to issue decrees having the force of law with immediate effect, but subject to parliament’s approval. In this particular instance, because the parliament is in recess until the beginning of October, the government has had a relatively free hand in devising and implementing decrees. Emergency powers have been used to expel large numbers of military, security, and police officers; other bureaucrats; university professors; and teachers, without compensation, retirement benefits, or a possible return to public service. Businessmen and civil society leaders alleged to have contributed to Gülenist activity have been taken into

custody, and many actually arrested. Gülenist-affiliated enterprises have been turned over to court-appointed caretakers, while properties of civil society organizations have been handed to the treasury.

More troublingly, the government has used the occasion to silence other opposition, especially those that the government thinks are linked in some way with the PKK. A number of academics who had signed the “Peace Petition” in January have lost their jobs, and members of the press who have severely criticized the government have been questioned and arrested. There is a general feeling that people are not being given fair due process. The opposition CHP has already said that it will challenge the decrees in the Constitutional Court. The government has meanwhile become aware that major injustices may have been done. The president and the prime minister have advised high-ranking officials to exercise utmost diligence, and promised that if mistakes have been made, people will be reinstated in their jobs.

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Problems Ahead

In addition to undermining the integrity of Turkey’s fledgling democracy, both the coup and the government’s response to it have generated problems. First, there is no question that the military purges have reduced the combat readiness of the Turkish military, particularly the air force, at a time when Turkey is engaged militarily in Syria. Ad hoc measures that the government has devised may prove insufficient if greater deployment is needed. Second, an impression that the rule of law is eroding has taken hold, which is already proving problematic in relations with the EU. It may also discourage foreign investment in the long run. Third, some MPs have asked that the AKParty

cleanse itself of Gülenists. If allowed to proceed, feuds may break out in the party, weaken it, and even end its parliamentary majority. Fourth, while the alleged Gülenist conspiracy has reduced the tensions between government and the opposition CHP and MHP, this may be temporary since the government seems set to continue to rule using a state of emergency. Fifth, the government has linked Kurdish terror with the Gülenists. It has also refused to cooperate with the HDP, the third-largest party in the parliament, alleging that it is the same as the PKK. Refusing to discuss peaceful resolution of the conflict may in the long run lead to more severe conflict. Sixth, the government insists that Fethullah Gülen himself should be extradited from the United States to Turkey. Impatience with the U.S. judicial process and the shortage of evidence to link him directly with the coup may produce an outcome that will only inflict greater damage on the already turbulent Turkish-U.S. relationship. Finally, as the anti-Gülenist campaign continues, more people may question how the government could have been deceived for so long.

The coup attempt was a challenge to democracy, but so may be the government's response. The eradication of the possibility of a takeover by a secret group organized in parallel with the state may necessitate drastic measures, but in the process, undermining that which is to be saved, i.e. democracy, may lead to long-term decline of Turkey's rule of law, not its enhancement.

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