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The Limits of Turkey's Post-Coup Attempt Consensus and Emerging New Political Realignment

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In Brief: In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in Turkey, the Turkish political class and society at large came together in a rare moment of consensus to reject the attempt. But this proved to be a short-lived process. The old fissures have reemerged. This ranges from discussion on the history to the restructuring of the state, from the search for a new constitution, hence a new political system, to the foreign policy. But of all the topics, the debate over the new constitution is the most contentious and has acquired the role of political and ideological marker. The old political cleavage along the secular-conservative/Islamic axis is likely to reemerge, increasing political polarization and having a deleterious impact on Turkey's society and politics. These trends and frictions in return are engendering a new realignment in the political map of the country.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in Turkey, the Turkish political class and society at large came together in a rare moment of consensus to reject the attempt. As a leader newly emerging from having defeated a vicious coup attempt, President Erdogan's popularity has reached new heights. The political class has put aside their differences and feuds to make common cause. In short, the maturity of the political class and social ownership of democracy and democratic procedures have underpinned the strength of Turkish democracy.

This temporarily but significantly reduced the level of polarization in the country. But long-standing political divisions and polarization have returned rather quickly. This ranges from discussion on the history to the restructuring of the state, from the search for a new constitution, hence a new political system, to the foreign policy. But of all the topics, the debate over the new constitution is the most contentious and has acquired the role of political and ideological marker.

Old Disputes In A New Context

The search for a completely civilian-crafted new constitution is decades old. Though intensified in recent years, the discussion of either rectifying the current troublesome parliamentary system or changing it to a presidential one is not new. Both the rejection of the old system and the defense of the constitution have thus far remained knee-jerk and political. Likewise, the political positions taken on the new constitution have also been divided according to camp. The point of departure for proponents as well as for opponents of the new system is personal. They justify the need for a new system that is shaped based on the stance and projections of President Erdogan. The same logic also defines the stance of opponents to the change of system.

Restructuring The State

This personality-centric approach to the political system has been one of the most glaring deficiencies in Turkey's ideological and identity-imposing state. Over the last decade, the state itself has been both the center and then the victim of all power struggles. First, a major power struggle occurred between the AK Party-led, mostly conservative Islamic bloc and the old Kemalist bureaucratic elite and social strata. As the military, judiciary, and police became the main battle-fields, these institutions emerged battered and further politicized from the fight. This process took place from late 2007 until 2010-11 when it ended with the victory of the conservative-Islamic camp over the secularist-Kemalist elites.

A crack appeared within the conservative-Islamic camp in the aftermath of this first struggle. In 2012-13, the fight began to take place between the AK Party government and the Gulenists. The same institutions were again the main battlefields and were further battered in these fights. This process is still ongoing. Turkey's state structure has taken major hits throughout all these processes. Its institutions are consequently in dire need of reform. Public trust in these institutions is very low, and this needs to be reversed. However, rebuilding and reforming these institutions will invite major political battles. The government appears determined to deal with these institutions in a major way. This in return will bring onto the table the issue of further politicization of the institutions, which will only weaken them and the backbone of Turkey's statecraft. Of course, the state isn't the only politicized phenomenon in Turkey. Many things that are taken for granted as neutral in many parts of the world are deeply political in Turkey.

History: Redrawing Political Boundaries

A recent debate over Turkey's history acted as a stark reminder of how tenuous the country's post-July 15 political consensus has been. Speaking to mukhtars (local councilors), President Erdogan questioned the official narrative which presented the Lausanne agreement as a victory as opposed to the unimplemented Sèvres agreement which envisaged the further partition of modern Turkey. The debate over the Lausanne agreement isn't new. It has always been a contentious topic between the largely nationalist-Kemalist-secularist segment of society, who subscribe to the official discourse that the agreement is the embodiment of the maximum that could have been achieved under the constraints and conditions of the time, and the conservative-Islamic segment of society who saw the agreement as a surrender by the political elites of the new republic to the victorious Western powers. When Erdogan raised the issue, he was fully aware of the sensitivity of the topic. And it is this sensitivity that can be directed towards political aims.

The debate over history serves two purposes. First, president Erdogan is exceptionally gifted in managing the politics of polarization. As the fight against the Gulenists intensifies, he is maintaining his present high level of societal support, and it seems that once again the main political feud will begin to take place largely speaking between the secularist-Kemalist and conservative-Islamic segments of society. Erdogan is also keen to enlist the nationalists' support for his domestic and foreign policy projections. Disputes and feuds over symbolic moments in history help consolidate his conservative-Islamic base and garner nationalists' support. Given the MHP's support for Turkey's foreign policy endeavours and its cooperative stance toward the governing party's aim of putting the new constitution with the introduction of the executive presidency as its central component to the public vote, this policy is currently paying off. Second, the fact that the Mosul province is a key area the conservatives say should have been retained by Turkey at Lausanne, this debate appears to aim to galvanize public support for Turkey's confrontational foreign policy endeavors in Iraq and Syria, and particularly Turkey's desire to take part in the ongoing Mosul operation, despite the central Iraqi government's overt and Iran's covert objections.

Foreign Policy: Uniting or Dividing Factor?

As Turkey's military presence in northern Syria and insistence on joining the Mosul operation illustrates, Turkey's foreign policy is unlikely to experience a calm period. The imperatives of regional geopolitics and upheavals seem to have had a pull factor on Turkey's foreign policy, drawing Turkey more into the regional geopolitical competition and into hotspots such as Syria and Mosul, pitting it against Iran. In fact, after a period of quiet in foreign policy discourse, President Erdogan has once again ratcheted up the discourse and stressed the principles and priorities that have driven Turkish foreign policy in recent years.

Confrontational foreign policy isn't only directed toward the Middle East. The Turkey-EU relationship is experiencing one of its lowest points, leading to speculation of suspension of membership talks, though prematurely. President Erdogan even suggested holding a referenda on the continuation of the membership process by the end of the year, causing anxiety amongst Western-oriented, secular section of the society.

This trend is set to continue. Whether by default or by design, Turkey is set to be further enmeshed in regional disputes and be more confrontational with its Western allies, particularly the European Union. This has had two largely contradictory effects on Turkish policy. Foreign policy has been a divisive issue in Turkey in recent years. It has been part and parcel of most recent feuds over ideology, identity, and politics. But it can also be a uniting factor. For the time being, with the partial exception of deterioration of Turkey-EU relations, Turkey's foreign policy is a uniting element. Setting aside the pro-Kurdish HDP, all remaining parties in parliament support Turkey's incursion into Syria and having a larger role in the Mosul operation. In this sense, Turkey's foreign policy endeavors have

underscored Turkey's post-July 15 failed coup attempt consensus and helped the military to regain part of its lost prestige. But the consensus behind this foreign policy is unlikely to persist. The more it becomes clear that Turkey hasn't moved far from the principles of its previous foreign policy, and the more Turkey engages with and becomes part of regional controversies, the more likely the consensus around Turkey's foreign policy will fade away. Foreign policy will then once again become another arena for Turkey's ideological and political wars.

The Contour Of A New Political Realignment

All the aforementioned factors are causing a new realignment to take shape on the political map. Given the fact that the Kurdish peace process is long shelved and the Kurdish issue is in the process of being resecuritized, there are more points of convergence both at the policy and political level between the MHP and the AK Party. The MHP is throwing its full support behind the government's fight against the PKK, its muscular foreign policy in Syria and Iraq, and its fight against the Gulenists. It also adopted a cooperative policy with the government on the new constitution and on changing the political system. Moreover, the nationalist bureaucrats are set to fill many gaps left as a result of the purge of Gulenists within the bureaucracy. Last but not least, MHP's leader Bahçeli partially owes his position to the government's fight against the Gulenists, as strong opposition within the MHP was tainted as a result of alleged support for the Gulenists, and hence lost its momentum in the aftermath of the coup attempt. All of these factors have created the foundation for a realignment between the government and the MHP.

In fact, President Erdogan himself already carries the nationalist and conservative currencies in his own pocket. With the new political energy unleashed as a result of the failed coup attempt, his approval rate, particularly among these segments of society, is exceptionally high. Neither on the nationalist front nor the conservative front are he and the AK Party likely to face any meaningful political rivalry in the foreseeable future.

Additionally, while the recent arrests of the pro-Kurdish lawmakers has further cemented nationalist-conservative/Islamist alliance, it has driven wedges between the government and the CHP, by default between MHP-CHP

The nature of the relationship between the government and the CHP has once again become acrimonious and tense. Different stances on policy issues and grassroots displeasure with the short-lived cooperation in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on both sides account for this fissure. While the CHP may part ways with the post-July 15 consensus, it is unlikely to form even ad hoc alliances with the pro-Kurdish HDP. The PKK's urban warfare strategy has eroded the HDP's political attractiveness and even its legitimacy. Therefore, any appearance of partnership with the HDP will bear heavy costs for the CHP. That doesn't mean that they won't by default share the same platform. In fact, they are likely sometimes to end up supporting similar policies and stances. In the end, largely speaking, both of them occupy the secular and leftist political spectrum. This paves the way for some sort of cooperation between the two, but this at best will be based on very shaky grounds. In the new realignment the nationalist-conservative bloc will likely prove to be more cohesive and sustainable than the secular-leftist bloc. In fact, any semblance of alliance between the HDP and the CHP will afford the AK Party an opportunity to exploit by accusing the CHP of being on the same side as the PKK, and hence appealing to the nationalist constituency of the CHP, which is by all accounts not negligible.

All in all, the passage of time has confirmed the unsustainability of Turkey's post-failed coup attempt consensus. The old political cleavage along the secular-conservative/Islamic axis is likely to reemerge, increasing political polarization and having a deleterious impact on Turkey's society and politics. Finally, these trends and frictions are engendering a new realignment on the political map of the country.

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