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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Why did Turkey's Bloodiest Coup Fail so Badly?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | July 2016

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Introduction

On the evening of July 15, Turkey witnessed an attempted military coup, beginning with the blocking of two bridges over the Bosphorus that join the Asian and European halves of Istanbul. Reports followed that the army had taken control of Istanbul airport and the state broadcaster (TRT). The coup's sole communique was broadcast shortly after midnight on Friday night, stating that "the Turkish armed forces, a foundational component of the Republic entrusted from the great leader Ataturk, and on the basis that peace at home means peace in the world ... have taken control of the levers of power from 03:00 on July 16 in the aim of establishing firmer relations and cooperation with international organizations and the international community to bring about peace and stability in the world." At the same time, a state of emergency was declared throughout the country.¹ According to sources in the Turkish military, the discovery of the coup plot on the afternoon of July 15 caused it to be brought forward by a few hours from its original launch time of 03:00 with the communique to go out at 06:00 am.

The Army and Politics in Turkey

For one hundred years the army was the main actor in Turkish political life and viewed itself as the founder of the Republic and defender of its values; the army's intervention in politics was therefore something familiar. After the coup against Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1908, the military in effect ruled the country. Following the defeat of the sultanate in World War I, the army of the Republic, under the leadership of Ataturk, defended Turkey's current borders and protected its independence, ruling the country directly until 1946. In that year, President Ismet Inonu decided to return to a constitution and hold pluralistic elections. However, the army subsequently undertook three coups, in 1960, 1971, and 1980 – one at the beginning of every decade. In 1997, the army, in what has become known as the "February 28 operation," ousted the governing coalition led by Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, but without mobilizing its forces.

¹ "Text of the communique of the failed Turkish coup," *Al Jazeera Net*, July 17, 2016, accessed July 21, 2016 at: <http://goo.gl/dNHZRS>.

After coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) tried to accommodate and coexist with a dubious military. In 2008, however, a planned coup attempt, known as the Ergenekon Trials (or the sledgehammer coup plot), was discovered, leading to the arrest and trial of hundreds of army officials.

In 2013, following disagreements between the AKP government and the Hizmet movement – a Sufi organization akin to a brotherhood, founded in 1970 by preacher Fethullah Gulen, that has infiltrated state and society – the army was rehabilitated once it became clear that most of those accused were not in fact involved in the planned coup. Rather, they had been accused by the Hizmet organization which was tightening its grip over the police and the judiciary and exploiting the chance to strengthen its influence in the military and other state institutions. This led the AKP government to rebuild the police forces and appoint its own loyalists.

It appears that a section of the army remained unhappy about the performance of the AKP government and its domestic and foreign policies, and was unwilling to accept further power going to an elected civilian government, allowing the latter to control the army and define its role as defending the borders of the country rather than continuing to intervene in politics. The lack of agreement between the government and the military constrained Turkish policy in Syria, and the possibility of a coup increased, particularly in light of the growing security threats after both the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) declared war on Turkey, problems compounded by increased Turkish differences with Russia, Israel, and many Western states, including the United States. To pre-empt a new round of purges of officers with suspect loyalties, usually undertaken by the Supreme Military Council (YAS) when it issues the list of promotions and transfers in August every year, the coup plotters sped up their efforts to overthrow the AKP government. It seems the accusations domestically that Erdogan's policies were causing Turkey to become isolated from its traditional allies, were a reason behind Turkish efforts to resolve some foreign differences and so reduce reasons for domestic tension.

Reasons the Coup Failed

There were many reasons for the coup to succeed, such as the element of surprise – at least in terms of timing – the weak international response, and the heavy firepower of the rebels in terms of aircraft and tanks that took to the streets in Istanbul and Ankara, given the participation of different parts of the military and senior officers in the Turkish

army. Nevertheless, the coup failed. The most important reason for this was the unanimity of the political class, the intellectual elite, the media, and large swathes of the Turkish people in rejecting the coup. The main opposition forces, led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), considered the political and intellectual heir of Ataturk's secularism, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), an ultranationalist right-wing party, and the Kurdish Peoples' Party (HDP), strongly opposed to the army's role in the Turkification of the Kurds, all rejected the coup – despite their major differences with the ruling party over policy and ideology. The rebels alienated all the political forces in the country by attacking parliament, which was bombed seven times from the air on the night of the coup. This was the first time that the Turkish parliament had been targeted in a coup, a building viewed by many Turks as a symbol of their political and party life and democracy. The media, despite its variety of views, also refused to back the coup; in fact, the opposition Turkish media deserves credit for giving AKP leaders the opportunity to appear on screen and send out messages after the rebels had taken control of state media. President Erdogan's appearance via video call on the CNN Turk channel, owned by the Dogan Group and with a strongly secularist orientation, had a major impact in foiling the coup attempt, since Erdogan sent a message to the Turkish people asking them to defy the wishes of the rebels and take to the streets in defense of democracy. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, former president Abdullah Gul, former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and other AKP officials also appeared in the media urging the Turkish people to reject the coup and take to the streets. The people themselves played the biggest role in defeating the coup. The masses took to the streets and stood up to the violence of the army, some of whose units had no qualms about firing on civilians, given that the coup resulted in around 300 fatalities, half of whom were civilians. Units of the army loyal to the elected government, such as the First Army which secured the President's return to Istanbul via Ataturk Airport, and units of the police and special forces also played an important role in foiling the coup.

The failure of the rebels to reach the President and kill him or detain him in his residency in Marmaris played a major role in causing the coup to fail. Military coups usually confirm their victory to the people with the detention or killing of the political leadership of the state, thereby imposing a new reality and regime.

It seems that the military forces that took part in the coup or supported it were larger than the government initially admitted. The notion that the army as a whole was not involved played a large part in encouraging the masses onto the streets. Subsequent

detentions, however, have encompassed the command of three out of the four Turkish armed forces, and key commanders in the air force, navy, and military intelligence. Hence, this was not a coup of middle- and low-ranking officers. The government could only rely on the police and intelligence service in the early hours of the coup.

This suggests that the government has serious work to do with the army. It may mean a restructuring, and will have a temporary effect on Turkey's regional role, with the country caught up in a domestic reorganization, especially of the army and state institutions.

International Positions

International views, the United States' in particular, were a shock for the Turkish government, since the US administration was expected to immediately condemn the coup and back the legitimate, elected government. US Secretary of State John Kerry, however, when questioned about his view of the coup attempt underway in Turkey at a press conference with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov at the end of his visit to Moscow to coordinate Russian and American action in Syria, was content to express his hope for "stability, and peace, and continuity within Turkey."² To make matters worse, the US embassy in Ankara issued a statement the night of the coup calling events in Turkey an "uprising."³ The next day, the White House issued a statement condemning the coup attempt, whose failure was by then clear, and giving absolute support to Turkey's "democratically-elected, civilian" government.⁴ The White House also urged all parties to the Turkish crisis to act within the rule of law and to avoid actions that would lead to further violence or instability.⁵

² "Secretary of State John Kerry responds to the possibility of a military coup in Turkey," *Politico*, July 15, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at:

<http://www.politico.com/video/2016/07/kerry-responds-to-possible-military-coup-in-turkey-059925>.

³ Megan Garvey, "State Department to U.S. citizens in Turkey: Do not go to our consulates or embassy," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/Kq4b2z>.

⁴ "The Situation in Turkey," Press Statement by John Kerry, U.S. Department of State, July 15, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/07/260132.htm>.

⁵ "Readout of the President's Update on the Situation in Turkey," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 16 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at:

The US position raised many questions for Turkish officials over the real US view of what was happening, with the Turkish minister of labor going as far as accusing the US of having orchestrated the coup attempt, and one editor of a newspaper aligned with the government writing a front-page article under the headline "US tries to assassinate Erdogan."⁶ The US administration denied these claims⁷, refusing to grant political asylum to the commander of the Incirlik airbase, who was later arrested for his role in planning the military coup.⁸ Meanwhile, Turkey asked the US to extradite the preacher Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania, on the grounds that he was the mastermind of the coup. Washington, however, asked Ankara to present its evidence for Gulen's involvement. Nevertheless, and despite Erdogan's concern to soften the language with the US and adopt a conciliatory tone, and Obama's direct communication with him, it is clear that the US did not display any passion for saving the democratic regime in Turkey, and would have had no regrets about Erdogan's removal.

The Government Response

Following the failure of the bloodiest coup attempt witnessed by the Turkish Republic since its establishment in 1923, the Turkish government, frightened by the extent of participation in the coup, has taken a series of measures to arrest or fire all those suspected of involvement in the coup attempt or of belonging to the Hizmet movement. Nearly 35,000 members of the army, police, and judiciary have been dismissed or arrested; more than 15,000 employees of the Education Ministry have been suspended; more than 1,500 university and faculty heads and deans have been forced to resign;

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/16/readout-presidents-update-situation-turkey>.

⁶ Gardiner Harris, "John Kerry Rejects Suggestions of U.S. Involvement in Turkey Coup," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/FCRGug>.

⁷ Victor Kotsev & John Dyer, "Turkey blames U.S. for coup attempt," *USA Today*, July 18, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at:

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/07/18/turkey-blames-us-coup-attempt/87260612/>.

⁸ Tim Arango & Ceylan Yeginsu, "Erdogan Triumphs After Coup Attempt, but Turkey's Fate Is Unclear," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/18/world/middleeast/turkey-coup-erdogan.html?_r=0.

and the licenses of more than 20,000 teachers in private schools have been revoked.⁹ The Interior Ministry announced that it has suspended around 9,000 of its employees on suspicion of involvement in the coup attempt, around 8,000 of whom are police officers, plus hundreds of gendarmes. Governors, inspectors, and consultants in the ministry were also dismissed or suspended. The government has made clear its desire to restore the death penalty, which has not been used since 2004 as part of the package of measures requested by the EU in order to progress Turkey's EU-accession negotiations. The Turkish President declared a three-month state of emergency according to Article 120 of the constitution, justifying it as a response to violence and threats to liberties, and stressing that it would not be used against rights and democratic freedoms, but would in fact strengthen them.¹⁰

These steps drew criticism, especially from Western media and political circles, and the government was accused of using the failed coup attempt as a pretext to undertake the complete eradication of its opponents in all the agencies and institutions of the state along the lines of the infamous "de-Baathification" undertaken by the US and its Iraqi allies following the fall of the regime of former president Saddam Hussein. The Turkish government denies that it is conducting a purge and taking revenge, but views the depth of Hizmet penetration within state institutions and agencies as demanding measures that will ultimately prevent another coup attempt against constitutionally-defined and popularly-mandated democracy and legitimacy.

Whatever the case, holding the whole Hizmet movement responsible for the coup may become an attempt to eradicate it. The movement is by no means small, with its membership perhaps exceeding one million. Blame must be apportioned only to those responsible and those who participated. The Hizmet movement should be restricted, dissolved, or may be even barred from undertaking any political activities, , but this does not require holding all its members responsible for the coup or turning it into a terrorist movement and adopting a policy of eradication.

In the coming stage, it will become clear whether the government is eliminating its political opponents or freeing the levers of the state from a parallel and infiltrating

⁹ Tim Arango & Ben Hubbard, "Turkey Pursues Cleric Living in U.S., Blamed as Coup Mastermind," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2016, accessed on July 21, 2016, at: <http://goo.gl/yxrfc8>.

¹⁰ "Erdogan: three-month state of emergency in Turkey," *Anadolu Agency*, July 20, 2016, accessed July 21, 2016 at: <http://bit.ly/29VvcQ3>.

organization. It must not be forgotten that the term "deep state" derives from Turkey, where it meant the real and active forces within the Turkish state, the security bodies in particular, that ran the state from behind the scenes and prevented democratization. However, the awareness of Turkish public opinion, civil society, political parties, and the media will prevent the government from exploiting the failed coup attempt to eradicate political rivals and infringe on democracy, just as they prevented the army from its coup. The Turkish people, with its active forces, parties, and media, caused the military coup to fail and defended democracy, not the foreign governments which are only now showing enthusiasm for democracy.

Conclusion

There are many lessons to be drawn from the events of the dangerous military coup in Turkey, a task for the Turkish government, people, and political parties. From the Arab perspective, the clear message is that if Turkish society had been split between the AKP and its opponents, it would not have been possible to defeat the coup and uphold the democratic regime. Even those with short memories are aware of how Egypt was divided between the Islamists and their opponents, and how that polarization dealt the death blow to the nascent and fragile democratic experience there.