



Turkey's failed coup: A night of irony (and fear)

Vassilis Ntousas, FEPS International Relations Policy Advisor

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FEPS
POLICY BRIEF

JULY 2016

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



Thinly organised, poorly executed, and uniformly condemned, Turkey's failed coup of July 15th 2016 came as an utter surprise. Besides the handful of experts who had cautioned against such a potentiality in the past few months, the very long interval between the last putsch to take place in the country and last Friday's attempt, had by and large faded this kind of unrest scenario from the Turkish political *modus operandi* and the Turkish public's collective memory. What is more, the seeming dominance of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had also worked to reinforce the idea that military interventions were a thing of the past.

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1. Rejection by all political parties

In spite of usually being vociferous in their criticism against President Erdoğan's autocratic tendencies, all opposition party leaders unequivocally condemned the uprising. Even when it was unclear whether the coup was destined to fail or not, they all issued statements, widely disseminated via social media, amplifying their message of support towards democratic institutions and the constitutional order.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) stated on Twitter that "This country had suffered a lot from the coups. We do not [wish to see] these difficulties repeated". Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş, the two co-chairs of the leading pro-Kurdish party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP), which has faced systematic prosecution by Mr. Erdoğan, also took a principled stand against the coup, declaring that "the only solution is democratic politics".



The tweets of the leaders of the two progressive parties in Turkey condemning the putsch on the night it happened

This uniform condemnation concerned as much the leaders of the parties as the overwhelming majority of the Turkish population. The thousands that took to the streets braving the tanks, demonstrating against the putschists were not only AKP supporters. Putting aside political preferences and often a huge discontent with the methods and actions of Mr. Erdoğan's regime, they represented a vastly wider arc of concerned citizens joining forces in order to stand up for democracy.

This very unity and solidarity of the anti-coup coalition (at times in the face of continued suppression and persecution) was perhaps not paradoxical given what was at stake; it exhibited that the country has come too far to render itself defenceless in front of a military junta. But for a President who has vehemently railed against his political opponents, it was nonetheless at least ironic. And the simple fact that this political and societal multi-segment mobilisation played a decisive part in tilting the pendulum in favour of the country's democratically elected leadership further accentuated this impression.

2. The use of social media

Following a similar rationale, the fact that President Erdoğan resorted so heavily in his efforts to thwart the coup on the very same media platforms and guerrilla media tactics that he has so methodically sought to control and undermine adds to the irony of the night.

Indeed, as it became increasingly evident that a still murky band of armed forces personnel were trying to launch a coup, the Turkish government immediately took to Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to rally the country behind Mr. Erdoğan. Against a backdrop of chaos and with his whereabouts unknown, the most telling instance of the dramatic hours the Turkish President must have gone through was his multiply interrupted call via FaceTime on CNN Türk, where he tried to circumvent the rebels' capturing of the national broadcaster, imploring the Turkish population to take to the streets in his support.



President Erdoğan's FaceTime Call on CNN Türk, and his tweet asking people to take to the streets

After this hurriedly executed, first address to the nation, a series of tweets and Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages and a nation-wide text message, along with a press conference at a hastily erected television studio set, followed, with the President, the Prime Minister and several of their key allies trying to regain control not only over the plotters' actions, but over the information narrative as well. Acting as multipliers, imams used their mosques' loudspeakers to spread the message, and so did thousands of protesters who defied the TV-ordered curfew, pouring onto the streets while streaming numerous individual broadcasts on Periscope and Facebook Live. Even the vast majority of journalists – whose work had been often severely suppressed over the past months, if not years – resisted the putschists' attempt to seize their outlets and shut them down, continuing to broadcast the genuine situation on the ground. Assisted by Mr. Erdoğan's uncanny communication skills, the confluence of all these factors helped him to outmanoeuvre and outpace the narrative put forward by the coup's organisers, ultimately reconsolidating the Turkish leadership's hold on power.

For a country often suffering from its President's routine tendencies to restrict media freedom and freedom of speech so as to acquiesce the opposition, therein lies the second irony surrounding this



coup attempt; the fact that the same democratic freedoms and media toolkit the Turkish President and his government have so regularly interfered with were the ones that so assertively helped to save the day.

3. Ineptitude of the coup plotters

For a number of reasons, not least because the coup plotters used an outdated 1970s playbook while being seemingly oblivious even to the fundamentals of the information environment they had to operate in, the attempted coup was not to be. Acting outside the chain of command and not succeeding in securing a critical mass of support within the military, meant that the people behind the coup did not have the necessary resources to seize and control all the critical centres of power. Even amongst the inner circles, the chain of command quickly faltered, with the majority of rebel soldiers caving quickly under the weight of public demonstrations. Failing to muzzle any key political figure was also damning, as was stumbling in their effort to project that they were reliably in control of the developments; they only spottily secured the newsrooms of the various media outlets and broadcasters and they did not immediately cut off the mobile phone and internet signal, easily handing the Turkish President the opportunity to get his message across.

As simple as it is to *ex post facto* trace why this power bid was unsuccessful (and the list of reasons above is by no means an exhaustive one), the plotters' utter lack of efficacy and the ease at which the coup was quelled has resulted in a number of elaborate theories about who was really behind it; some even going so far as to suggest that the attempt bears the marks of an orchestrated coup by President Erdoğan himself, aimed at allowing him to enhance his grip on power.

However intelligently explained, such scenarios can have little resemblance to reality, primarily due to how far events went to have been genuinely staged and how narrowly Mr. Erdoğan has been said to have escaped from the plotters.

Nonetheless, for an uprising that so ambitiously (and self-indulgently) intended to restore the 'democratic and secular rule of law' and to overthrow the still dominant Turkish President, the fact that things were so badly organised and executed does add an extra layer of irony to the events. This becomes easily apparent, especially if the coup organisers' actions end up backfiring with respect to each and every one of these objectives; providing Mr. Erdoğan first with the certainty of the need to more actively consolidate his power and crackdown on dissent, and second with the legitimacy to push faster for a more authoritarian Islamist Turkey, with three years to go before any further elections.

A double-edged reality

This latter point is the most consequential ironic aspect of what lies beneath and beyond Friday's coup attempt. This is because it concerns precisely the double-edged reality in which Turkey now finds itself enmeshed in.

On the one hand, if the coup had succeeded and dictatorship had been established, it would have been a true horror for the country. A successful overthrow of the Mr. Erdoğan regime after 13 years in power would have torn the country apart, perhaps devolving even to a Syria-like state of civil war. Yet, now that the coup has been successfully stopped, the emergent reality could still very well lead

to a grave deterioration of democratic standards and an exacerbation of the already sizeable fissures within the country.

For all the amassed optimism that the aforementioned unity within the political class and amongst the citizens in foiling the coup attempt could signify a change to the positive (even in incremental terms), it is not very difficult to see how a shift first towards retribution and consequently towards greater authoritarianism is the more likely scenario.

Consider the trajectory, because there is definitely a cautionary tale here.

For a President who has for long been fearful of military interventions, the crucial fact that an actual coup has transpired has the potential of fanning his erstwhile suspicions and playing right into his hands. An emboldened President Erdoğan can now more easily frame any opposition to him as falling within the same cadre as the coup leaders. His propensity towards autocratic excesses can now be cemented, underlying even further the necessity in his own calculus of purging critics and silencing dissent. Seeing his survival as a license to entrench his powers, he might also use the crushed coup to redesign the country's institutions in his own image and to his own benefit, finally pushing for the long sought-after constitutional amendment of establishing a fully-fledged Presidential system with sweeping executive powers.

From an international perspective, as the night of existential angst for Turkish Democracy unfolded, the initial overwhelming opprobrium against the coup was quickly combined with statements that seemed to echo these fears.

While immediately condemning the attempted coup and reiterating the European Union's full support to the democratic institutions of the country, Federica Mogherini, the Union's High Representative and Vice President for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, clearly underlined "the need for a swift return to Turkey's constitutional order with its checks and balances", stressing the importance for the rule of law and fundamental freedoms to prevail.¹ In a statement released on behalf of the Group of Socialists and Democrats, Kati Piri, the European Parliament's Rapporteur on Turkey, also emphasised that "the rule of law has to be respected and democracy strengthened in reaction to the coup. That is why we remain deeply concerned about the thousands of arrests of military police, judges, prosecutors and governors within such a short time".² In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, reiterated in a call with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, his country's support for the democratically elected government in Turkey, yet also "urged restraint by the Turkish government and respect for due process - and its international obligations - as it investigates and uncovers additional information about those involved".³

¹ Joint statement by High Representative/Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, and EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn on the situation in Turkey, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160716_02_en.htm?cookies=disabled, visited 16/07/2016

² S&D Group calls on the Turkish authorities to observe rule of law in the aftermath of the coup attempt, <http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sd-group-calls-turkish-authorities-observe-rule-law-aftermath-coup-attempt>, visited 19/07/2016

³ Secretary Kerry's Call With Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/260148.htm>, visited 17/07/2016

Turkey's longest night and the day after

Evidently, this widespread fear that the momentum will be used by the Turkish President as a *carte blanche* to extend his already formidable personal grip on power and to intensify his suppression of any opposition (whether perceived or real) is by no means a certain outcome. Yet, if the past is prologue, Mr. Erdoğan's history makes it more likely than not that he will not use the moment to heal divisions, unite the country, or be more tolerant towards legitimate processes of dissent.

The first reactions of the government have been quite telling in this respect. Barely 12 hours after the coup attempt started unfolding, Turkish authorities acted against the opposition. The almost immediate rounding up of approximately 3,000 troops suspected of taking a part in the plot and removing nearly 2,700 prosecutors and judges, including from top courts, served to raise serious concerns about the handling of the situation. At the time when this brief was penned, a vast purge of state institutions was underway, with reports of 'at least 45,000 people [having] been rounded up, sacked or suspended from their jobs by Turkey's government', including civil servants, teachers, university deans, members of the military, security forces, the judiciary and the media.⁴ The sheer speed, intensity and extensity of the crackdown provide revealing signs that the democratic order that was saved by the putsch last week is now likely to become even more elusive.

In the days to come and as the magnitude of the backlash by Mr. Erdoğan becomes more fully exposed, it would be useful to remember that the immediate crisis may have ended, but the long-term repercussions of the event and the trajectory on which they can put Turkey remain of paramount importance. Turkey's bungled putsch, with all its inherent paradoxes and ironies, may have created an initial impression or hope that a semblance of national unity can be found within the established milieu of deep-seated polarisation that has dominated domestic Turkish politics for years.

This hope is more likely than not to fade. All the indications seem to be pointing to the fact that the same democratic reflexes that helped save the day could now be in greater jeopardy than before. And of course now that democracy was saved, the lingering question is whether it can be restored to its true meaning. For all the progressive forces within Turkey and all the international players that so swiftly and so adamantly condemned last Friday's coup attempt as a truly misguided effort to correct something problematic with something far worse, this is an intensely complicated question. Yet it is one which credible answers should be very quickly found for.

⁴ Turkey coup: Crackdown toll passes 45,000, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36842073?ocid=socialflow_twitter, visited 19/07/2016