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A Failed Coup in Turkey: What are the Consequences?

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What is the Issue?

For a moment, the military coup attempt in Turkey caused great confusion in the populous country connecting Europe with Asia. But within less than a day, the episode confirmed the decreased ability of the military to intervene in Turkey's democracy, the continuous popular support for the democratically elected government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the government's determination to consolidate its position. This EDA Insight provides context on the coup attempt and explores the implications of its aftermath, both domestically as well as internationally.

The Failed Coup

On Friday 15 July 2016, a faction of the Turkish army attempted a coup d'état in Turkey, targeting government and media institutions in both Ankara and Istanbul. Away on holiday in the beach town of Marmaris, President Erdogan was taken by surprise, military Chief of Staff, General Hulusi Akar, was taken hostage, tanks surrounded the presidential palace and bombs hit the parliament building. A group calling itself "Council for Peace in the Homeland" declared martial law and a curfew.

But within a couple of hours, it became clear that the perpetrators could not rally the support needed for a successful take-over. Using social media, President Erdogan was able to call upon his popular base to go out on the streets to oppose the disloyal soldiers. He appointed General Umit Dunder, Commander of the First Army, as acting Chief of Staff, and ordered jets to take down those military assets deployed by the putschists. Clashes left at least 290 people dead and injured many more. Erdogan has vowed to root out the "virus" that caused the revolt.¹

Erdogan's Challenge to Kemalism

The attempted coup in Turkey is the latest episode in a long history of complex military-civilian relations that goes back to the birth of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, following the demise of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. Turkey's first leader, Mustafa Kemal, transformed the previous, religion-based Ottoman system into a secular, Western-oriented parliamentary democracy. However, distrusting the religious conservative population, the military was granted a dominant role in the design of the new state

institutions: it stood above the government, ready to "correct" democracy whenever it threatened the "Kemalist", secularist vision of the state.

Within this "Turkish model" the army serves as a fourth branch of government, to check excessive majoritarian tendencies, which it did several times.² The military threw out civilian governments in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. The reason for military meddling in politics most often was to check those governments that experimented with letting religion back into politics. After every military interference, a period followed in which politicians were arrested, exiled or executed before new elections were organized. Still, Turkish constituencies have tended not to vote for candidates preferred by the military.

Successfully rallying the conservative electorate of Anatolia, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) was first elected in 2002, a year after the party was established. It has won every single election since. Erdogan served as Prime Minister from 2003 to 2014, after which he became President of the Turkish Republic. Curbing the role of the military in politics and allowing for more religious freedoms in society have been key priorities for the AKP and its voters.

When Erdogan was elected to office, the army was still the dominant force within the country. Using Turkey's bid for accession to the European Union (EU), the AKP was getting broad international support to push through a set of reforms. Most importantly, the criteria for EU accession included the subordination of the army to civilian control, as well as freedom of religion. These reforms weakened the army as a stand-alone powerhouse.

At the same time, Erdogan purged the hard-core "Kemalist" factions of the military and promoted officers sympathetic to his AKP. In 2007, the military explicitly threatened his party over their policy stances, but the overwhelming popular support for Erdogan meant it could not intervene as it had done with previous governments. The 15 July coup attempt was the first serious intervention launched against the AKP from the barracks.

The fact that the coup failed so rapidly indicates that Erdogan has successfully weakened this pillar of the Kemalist state. The condemnation of the attempt by all political parties, including the secular Republican

People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), shows that Turks have gotten attached to their civilian, democratic institutions. There are many Turks that vehemently oppose Erdogan's rule, but the majority still prefers him over a return to military rule.

The AKP and the Gülen Movement

Rather than lashing out at the secularist elements within the army, Erdogan has put the blame for the coup attempt on the Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen and his global Gülen movement. This movement, which is said to advocate a moderate Sunni Islam, is believed to have significant influence in the police and the judiciary and has become a more pronounced competitor to the AKP. Therefore, the government wants to curb its influence. Gülen himself, from self-imposed exile in the United States, denies any involvement in the coup.

Gülen actually used to be a strong ally of the AKP in the push to degrade the Kemalist military and to increase room for Islam in society. Through his connections in the judiciary, he enabled the trials of high-level generals. But in December 2013, Erdogan and Gülen fell out and became ferocious enemies. The reasons behind the fall-out included Gülen's criticism of the AKP's crackdown of the May 2013 Gezi Park protests and Erdogan's suspicion that Gülen encouraged the judiciary, in December of that same year, to investigate a vast corruption scandal that involved Erdogan's government as well as his family. In May 2016, the Turkish government officially designated the movement as a terrorist organization.³

Implications within Turkey and beyond

The immediate aftermath of the events is showing that the failed coup attempt will have important implications, both at the level of domestic politics, as well as at the international level. With regard to domestic politics and policies, these are likely to include:

- **A further crackdown on military and political opposition:** Having warned continuously of a potential coup and a "parallel state", Erdogan and his AKP appear likely to consolidate the grip on power even further and purge those with Kemalist as well as Gülenist sympathies from the army, the police and the judiciary. Indicating the scale, within

the first couple of days after the coup attempt, the government had reportedly suspended around 9,000 police officers and arrested 6,000 soldiers, 3,000 judges, 30 governors and one third of all generals and admirals.⁴

- **A deepening division within Turkish society:** All political parties spoke out against the coup. However, instead of using this as a unifier, Erdogan's purge risks deepening the gap between his supporters and opponents. Those that answered his calls to go onto the street to defend the regime, did so chanting religious slogans, thereby unsettling the significant secularist segment of Turkish society.
- **A greater likelihood of constitutional reform:** For the moment, Erdogan appears to come out of the events stronger and even more determined. In recent years, he has actively been pushing for constitutional reforms that would endow the Turkish President with executive powers. It is likely that he will use the current momentum to try to push for this longstanding, personal objective.
- **A further crackdown on freedom of press:** Justifying his policy by pointing to national security needs in light of Kurdish and Daesh terrorist attacks, the AKP has curbed press and academic freedoms in Turkey. It has closed down news outlets linked to the Gülen movement, such as *Today's Zaman*, and has detained a number of academics critical of AKP's policies. That crackdown is likely to intensify.

On the international stage, many governments have long felt uneasy about the AKP and its policies. Some are particularly worried about Erdogan's authoritarianism, others have looked warily at the growth of political Islam under his rule, and still others have distrusted Turkish handling of regional conflicts and the related refugee problem. While the main short-term consequences are likely to fall on the domestic side, international spillovers can include:

- **Increased international unease about Erdogan's reaction:** In dialogue with international partners, Erdogan will use the coup attempt as a justification of his crackdown and the show of popular support will enable him to emphasize the democratic nature of his approach. However, the scope of the purge, the Islamist nature of the popular support, and the calls for a reinstatement of the death penalty will further fuel international unease about his rule.

- ***A potential negative impact on US-Turkish relations:***

The Turkish government has called for the extradition of Fatullah Gülen, who resides in the United States. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has said “the country that stands behind this man is no friend to Turkey” and the way the US handles the request will affect US-Turkish relations. A refusal could have implications for Turkey’s role in NATO, the global fight against Daesh and the use of the Incirlik airbase.⁵

- ***Spillover effects in other countries:*** The events can have implications for countries with large numbers of citizens with Turkish roots, including Germany. An intensification of the clashes between supporters and opponents of Erdogan could lead to smaller protests and incidents in these countries. A stronger AKP could also invigorate supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere in the region, including in Egypt.

- ***A decrease in Turkey’s regional power projection:***

With the problems at home increasing and the military degraded, there is a possibility that Turkey, in the short term at least, will tone down its involvement in regional conflicts and gravitate back to Erdogan’s initial foreign policy objective of “zero problems with its neighbors”.⁶ This could for example have consequences for the balance of powers in Syria and Libya.

Conclusion

The failed coup has shown that the relationship between the government and the army in Turkey has fundamentally changed. For the first time in Turkish history, a civilian leader has generated loyalty from key military actors for his non-Kemalist rule. The subsequent purge of opposition to Erdogan’s rule - Kemalists and Gülenists alike - will further cement Erdogan’s grip, but also deepen societal divisions in Turkey. Greater animosity between advocates and opponents of his rule will add to the already existing problems Turkey faces, involving Kurds, Daesh and the Syrian refugees. The events might also have implications for Turkey’s role in the region. So far, Ankara has not fared very well in its efforts to fight Daesh or solve regional crises. The purges are likely to drain morale as well as capabilities of the Turkish military, potentially making it even less effective in these endeavours.

Endnotes

- 1) "Turkey coup arrests hit 6,000 as Erdogan roots out 'virus'", *BBC World*, 17 July 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36818401>
- 2) Ozan O. Varol, "The Turkish "model" of civil–military relations", *Oxford Journal of International Law*, 11 (3), pp. 727–750, <http://icon.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/3/727.full>
- 3) "Turkey officially designates Gülen religious group as terrorists", *Reuters*, 31 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-gulen-idUSKCN0YM167>
- 4) "Vast purge in Turkey as thousands are detained", *New York Times*, 19 July 2016.
- 5) James Stavridis, "Turkey and NATO: what comes next is messy", *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/18/turkey-and-nato-what-comes-next-is-messy-coup-erdogan-incirlik-air-base-nuclear-weapons/>
- 6) "Policy of zero problems with our neighbors", Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa>