Report

The 15th Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey: Structural Roots

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Turkey in shake-up of security forces after failed coup [AlJazeera]

Abstract

Since the July 15, 2016 coup, Turkey has been living in what might be termed 'momentous times'. Since then the country has been struggling to deal with the aftershocks of the failed coup. People are still grieving for the loss(1) of 240 lives as well as caring for the more than 2,000 injured. Despite all of this, the country has emerged more cohesive, with shows of unity across almost the entire spectrum of political and social classes. In fact, the public's sense of ownership of Turkey's democratic gains and the political classes' maturity were crucial in defeating the coup attempt. These are necessary but not suffi-cient conditions for permanently closing the door on the age of coups, and terminating the shady and illegal activities of 'rogue' elements within the state. This article attempts to explain the structural foundation of the coup, highlighting the role played by the rogue groups 'occupying' some key state institutions. Three dimensions are vital in this respect. 1) Turkey's over-centralised and identity-imposing state makes it easier for rogue ele-ments to infiltrate and dominate the state for their own purposes, including would be coup-plotters. 2) The lack of proper problem-solving mechanisms between the govern-ment and opposition only aggravates this institutional flaw. 3) While formulating its poli-cies to deal with the attempted coup, the government should not go for easy fixes. In-stead, it should deal with the conjectural, group-specific, and structural foundations of what it had experienced on the night of July 15.(2)

Introduction

Turkey is still grappling with the aftermath of its failed coup attempt of July 15. What is-sues still need to be understood before the public has a solid understanding of the coup? The only thing that the majority of citizens seem to agree upon is the identity of the perpe-trators. A wide cross-section of the public believes that the secretive and shady Gülenist network is behind the coup. Gülen is designated as a terrorist organisation by

Turkey in 2014. To use the lines of the 'Economist magazine'(3), most of the people and political elites are of the view that besides the Gülenist network's public face, it has had "a clan-destine arm—a network of sympathisers who have colonised Turkey's judiciary, police and army." The public consensus is that this clandestine arm was deployed to wage the coup on July 15th.

This point appears to have been confirmed by the confessions and testimonies of the growing numbers of the arrested perpetrators and other military officers. One of the most important testimonies(4) was that of the Chief of General Staff, Hulusi Akar, who was held hostage by the putschists on the night of the coup. In his testimony, Akar said that one of his captors offered to put him on the phone with Fethullah Gülen, founder of the Gülen movement. Similar to president Erdogan's chief military aides, one of his aides al-so confessed to being member of the Gulenist network.

Turkey has a long history of coups and failed coup attempts. Turkey had successful coups in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997.(5) In 1962, 1963, and 2016 (July 15th), Turkey ex-perienced failed coup attempts.(6) Of all the coups and the coup attempts, this latest one proved to be the bloodiest and the most traumatising. For the first time in Turkey's history(7), the parliament, the presidential complex, the headquarters of the National Intelligence Organisation and of the Special Forces were bombed.

By any account, Turkey is feeling the reverberations of the coup. Since this attempt, Tur-key has been struggling to heal. The the loss(8) of 240 lives has affected many people. Similarly, more than 2,000 citizens were injured as a result of the violent events of night of July 15. One positive outcome of the coup is that the loss and the violence have mobi-lised many segments of society to unite and rally against the plotters. The backlash from the Turkish public against the coup is massive.

According to Anadolu Agency(9), the cross-party pro-democracy rally held in Istanbul on 7 August 2016, was the largest such gathering in Turkey's political history. The president, the prime minister and the leaders of the main opposition parties—barring only the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP)—shared the same platform to speak with one voice against the coup attempt. In so doing, they helped celebrate the public's sense of ownership of Turkey's emerging democracy. This sense of ownership might have been one of the primary factors that indirectly contributed into the failure of the attempted coup. Not just civilian politicians, and the people at large, also listen to, probably for the first time in Turkey's history, the Chief of General Staff speaking on the same platform, denounc-ing the attempted coup and pledging loyalty to the civilian system of rule.

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All of the above developments were encouraging. Public rallies against the coup, and the maturity of the political class in putting aside feuds to resist the coup and defend democracy were factors that helped protect Turkey's political system.(10) To put it concisely, the public's sense of ownership and the maturity of the political classes have emerged as factors that underpin Turkey's democracy.

These factors, however, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for making a permanent shift from the military wrestling power illegally from civilian politicians, and for termi-nating the shady and illegal activities of rogue elements within the state. More is needed to ensure that Turkey will not face another coup attempt in the future. Three measures in particular are vital to achieving a coup-free political future for the country. That is, a sys-temic ability to make it politically and legally costly for any rogue group seeking to domi-nate state institutions outside the rules of democratic competition or through narrow inter-ests that lead to the abuse of power.

Structural roots

Structurally, the over-centralised nature of the Turkish state makes it easier for would be coup plotters to achieve their goals and for a well-organised rogue element to exercise a disproportionate level of power.(11) Systems where power is diffuse and not concentrat-ed are more difficult to undermine or dominate. Ideologically, Turkey's proactive state cre-ates incentives for socio-political or religious groups to seek a presence within it and in-fluence it through public institutions and fulfill their narrow designs and policy prefer-ences for the state and society at large. Politically (or in terms of political culture), the lack of proper political communication, dialogue and problem-solving mechanisms between the ruling parties and other opposition groups has generally paved the way for actors to gain a non-democratic foothold in the political system. This structural flaw within the sys-tem opens up narrowly wielded political power, for abuse.

Turkey's over-centralised state

Turkey's over-centralised administrative system creates(12) an incentive for groups and narrow interests to first seek a presence within the state apparatus and then to dominate it. In most indicators of political centralisation, Turkey is far above the OECD average. For instance, the central government collects(13) almost 70 percent of total revenues, far more than the OECD average of 58 percent. Even more striking, 85 percent of public servants work for the central government in Turkey, while only 15 percent work in local government.(14) This is not only the highest among the OECD countries, but is also high for a unitary state. For example, 45 percent of public servants work for the central gov-ernment in France, and only 15 percent work for the central administration in Sweden, both unitary states.

In an over-centralised system, it is relatively easier for certain groups to wield disproportionate power over the system. Once control of key positions in some state institutions is secured, then influence incommensurate with the size or support commanded by a small group is exercised. The case of the Gülenist network and their actions within the state machinery confirm this point. The presence of the Gülenists at the societal level has always been insignificant. But the fact that they almost completely 'occupied' some institutions, such as the police and judiciary, and dominated others, such as the army, gave them disproportionate influence and power.

As a corollary, decentralisation will by default tame the ambition of groups seeking to infil-trate and dominate the system. For, the large number of institutions and the geographic and administrative distribution of these institutions will be too expansive to easily domi-nate. The state's power will not be as concentrated as is the case at the moment and at the time of the July 15 coup.

Identity-Imposing state

In addition, this over-centralised state is also extremely proactive in attempting to influence the identity and ideology of its society through methods of 'social engineering'.(15) To make the picture clearer, state-society relations during the republican period are useful to examine. From its inception, Turkey has been structured not as a modern state com-posed of citizens, but rather as an identity/ideology driven state composed of groups. Public institutions were not regarded in neutral terms; instead they were identified with certain ideologies. While the army and judiciary were traditionally regarded as defenders of Kemalism, a set of principles attributed to the founder of modern Turkey, the police were deemed as a nationalist hub, especially in the 1980-90s. Starting from the mid-1990s, the Gülenists came to dominate both institutions – the army and the police -- by each passing year. Needless to say that neutrality, professional delivery of public services have suffered immensely as a result.

As a reflection of this, the state did not regard itself as simply serving the public. Rather, it saw itself as having the duty to steer the public in the right direction. Moreover, for a long time, this state encouraged a preferred identity of secular, western-oriented Turkish na-tionalism, while securitizing(16) the Kurdish and Islamist identities. In this context, social groups whose world-views and identities did not conform to that of the state were regard-ed with suspicion and excluded.

Such exclusionist and identity-imposing policies of the state have caused the two types of answers to be produced by the social groups whose identity did not conform to that pre-ferred by the state. First, those whose identity was securitised believed that the only way to change this was through gaining access to the levers of power within the state.

Sec-ond, the previously strict and exclusionist procedures encouraged members of these groups to hide their identities when "infiltrating" state institutions.

Such a belief, coupled with the nature of the state, gave the state apparatus a strong pull factor for any group that aspired to make its imprint on public life. In this respect, the Gü-lenist network was partially the product of Turkey's authoritarian, overly centralised, Ke-malist state.

Yet, this situation has partially changed in the last decade. Coming from a particular reli-gious or socio-political background no longer poses a danger to a public servant's job se-curity. As the state changes, so should religious and social movements in their approach to the political system. Contrary to other socio-political or religious groups, the fact that the Gülenists had insisted on and continued with their previous secretive methods of infiltrat-ing the state has justifiably raised many questions about their motivations. In fact, previ-ously many have raised questions about the Gülenists' ulterior motivations for still 'hid-ing' their identity. For, revealing these identities was no longer inviting punishment, ex-clusion or discrimination. In fact, the activities of the Gülenists, particularly starting from 2012 and culminating in the recent coup attempt, confirm that the hiding of the identity was not about avoiding exclusion and discrimination. Instead, it was part and parcel of dominating the state and through it executing its own parochial group agenda.

While dismantling the Gülenist network within the state, the government should also take a lesson from this experience, and strive to make the state ideologically neutral. In return, it should demand greater transparency from any socio-political /religious groups seeking to compete for and wield power in Turkey

A functional problem-solving mechanism between the government and the opposi-tion

Finally, the interaction and cooperation between political parties and elites has proven critical in defeating the coup attempt, showing us the way forward for sorting out the other major challenges that Turkey is facing today. Whether out of necessity or by choice, whenever Turkey's current and previous governments have opted for a partner to deal with major challenges or impending crises, the result seems to be the same. They have chosen their partner from outside parliament and the political sphere. For instance, in taming the politically meddlesome, threatening and coup-prone military, the AK Party felt obliged to cooperate with the Gülenists, particularly between 2007-2010, when the power struggle within the military was at its peak. As a result, the Gülenists greatly expanded their presence within the state structure, laying the ground for their future shady and ille-gal activities.

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Likewise, in dealing with the aftermath of the derailing of the Kurdish peace process since July 2015, the government sought the help of the military and bestowed upon it fur-ther power.(17) For instance, the conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has seen the military chip into some of the power of civilian governors. Therefore, all coopera-tion with non-political forces has ended up empowering them. Historical precedent sug-gests that whenever these non-political forces have acquired too much power, they have tended to abuse it. The latest coup attempt is a case in point.

This picture reveals that the non-settlement of major political issues has provided fertile ground for groups to acquire excessive power through non-democratic means. In addi-tion, the non-existence of proper channels of political dialogue and cooperation between the governing party and opposition parties has paved the way for alternative, unaccount-able groups to emerge to fill the void. The lesson that needs to be taken from this is that the government should have a well-developed road-map for dealing with Turkey's major issues, and not least the Kurdish issue. Secondly, in its endeavors, the government should seek the assistance of the opposition. Needless to say, this in return requires a willing and responsible opposition to engage constructively with the government on major policy issues. Such engagement between the government and opposition will not leave loopholes in the political system for rogue elements to abuse the system.

To sum it up, Turkey is likely to take many coup-proofing measures. While doing so, it should take the comfort from the fact that both Turkey's society and the political class have rejected the coup. This in return should encourage the government not to confine its search for easy fixes. Instead, the government should focus on the conjectural, group-specific, and structural foundations of what it experienced on the night of July 15. While breaking up the Gülenist network, as a structural measure, the government should de-crease the level of state centralisation and terminate identity-imposing politics. Last but not least, the government and opposition should strive to create proper public channels and mechanisms for problem-solving among themselves.

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