



## Turkey After the Failed Military Coup

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The failed military coup on 15 July 2016 has become the most important political development in Turkey's long list of its failing Zero Problem policy. The immediate suspect of the failed coup attempt is Fethullah Gulen and his movement with whom the AKP government has developed a problematic relation since 2013. At domestic level, Turkey has been put under emergency laws to 'cleanse' the system from the Gulen elements, and other terrorist groups. Internationally, Turkey's relation with its NATO partners mainly the United States are under pressure as Turkey's political leadership sense an American hand behind the coup attempt, an allegation that US authorities have strongly denied. The tension between the two has rationalised Turkey's normalisation of relations with Turkey's estranged neighbours and friends, Russia, Israel, Iran and Syria.

The dramatic coup attempt had taken an entirely different route than the previous successful coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997's post-modern coup, the softest form of coup as the military had abstained from taking over the power. What happened on 15 July 2016 night was more than a coup, it was spread in two different cities; it had mobilized unprecedented force which involved servicemen from all three commands. Turkey's armed forces have made a statement confirming that 35 planes, including 24 fighter jets and 37 helicopters, 37 tanks and 246 armoured vehicles were used in the coup attempt.<sup>1</sup> At least 246 anti-coup protesters were killed by the coup soldiers. Looking into the gravity of the attempt, US Embassy in Ankara had used the

controversial term “uprising” to describe the development, though it was deleted after the attempt failed.<sup>2</sup>

The attempt started failing when it could not control the public and private broadcasting centres immediately, leading the ruling party leaders to use both social media and broadcast media to ask its supporters to oppose the coup attempt. The ruling party was relieved to know that the Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar had not supported the coup plotters and was taken hostage for not cooperating with them. Also, both President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim could not be detained immediately as the common practice in the past coup. By 3 in the morning, President Erdogan flew from his holiday resort in Marmaris to Istanbul amid the cheering crowd of his supporters where he addressed the media, warning the coup plotters and their supporters of dire consequences. He had already his prime suspects behind the coup; the US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement.

Chaotic scenes were seen at the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, airport premises in Ankara and Istanbul where anti-coup protesters had effectively blocked the movement of military tanks. Similarly, police came into action to take back the control of state broadcasting centre TRT. By early morning at 6, the government declared that the coup attempt has been successfully thwarted, though small operation continued until the second day.

### **Who is behind the coup attempt?**

Despite coup plotters’ public statement that they wanted to protect country’s secular constitution, Erdogan, and his government was convinced that the Kemalists were not behind the attempt, it was rather his old ally, Fethullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement. This was a shared perception among the ruling AKP, the main opposition CHP, and the nationalist MHP parties. The Kurdish HD party had always a bitter relation with Gulen because of his religious views. In the last one and half decade, the main Kemalist forces have effectively been sidelined by the ruling Islamist party, both from state institutions and politics. Constitutional amendments from 2001 to 2008 have led to the restructuring of the National Security Council (MGK), once a military power centre considered as the counter weight of the government. Since Erdogan has formed his party in 2002 after breaking away from the main Islamist Refah Party led by Necmettin Erbakan, AK party had relied on Fethullah Gulen and his spiritual movement for support of a large number of conservative voters and officers in the government.

Many in opposition had been accusing Erdogan of having sheltered Gulenists and giving them much space.<sup>3</sup> The decade-long relation between Erdogan and the Hizmet movement started having fissures in 2012 after Erdogan fearing from the parallel state structure or the deep state, a term now reserved for Gulen movement. Fethullah Gulen represents a mystical branch of Hanafi-Sunni Islam which believes in the emergence of Mahdi, the Islamic version of Messiah, who will have extraordinary skills to fix all problems faced by the humanity. Many followers of Gulen believe that Gulen himself is a Messiah. Since Turkey's secular constitution does not allow private mosques, Gulen himself started his career as a religious preacher under the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DİB) in the 1960s. As his popularity rose, his relation with the secular military leadership deteriorated and political leadership occasionally tried to use his popularity.

In September 2000, the army chief of staff General Huseyin Kivrikoglu, indirectly disapproved the Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit's public endorsement of Gulen activities, and accused that "they [Gulen followers] were working against the state every day in order to overthrow it. He feared that they had spread everywhere."<sup>4</sup> The arrival of AK party in 2002 became a new opportunity for the Gulen movement to strengthen its presence in government and spread its large network of educational institutions and a media empire until the gradual mistrust seeped in.

From 2007 to 2012, Turkey's counter-terrorism officers claimed to have detected two coup plots against the AKP government in which dozens of senior military officers, judges, journalists and civil right activists were arrested and tried. The cases, known as the Ergenekon trials and Sledgehammer, have revealed the most sensitive and detailed information related to the sabotage activities and coup plans against the Islamist government. In 2012, the trail of the investigations reached to Hakan Fidan, the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Erdogan's close confidante and he was questioned by Ankara's counter terrorism unit if he had some links with the Kurdish terror outfit PKK. This marked the first major strain on the Gulen-Erdogan relations since Erdogan assumed power in 2002. Among the other accused was an investigative journalist Ahmet Sik who was trying to publish a book<sup>5</sup> on the Gulen movement's infiltration of the police force.<sup>6</sup>

By late 2013, Erdogan government was convinced that the officers loyal to the Gulen movement are using their influential positions to create a crisis by fabricating documents for both

cases to create a parallel state structure. Meanwhile, cases of illegally phone calls tapping were noted and corruption cases were disclosed in which Erdogan started accusing the Gulen elements.<sup>7</sup> In August 2015, soon after a court judgment acquitted many officers accused in Ergenekon case, the main persecutor Zekeriya Öz managed to flee to Armenia to avoid an arrest warrant against him in another case.<sup>8</sup> Zekeriya Öz was believed to be a close aide of Gulen.<sup>9</sup> Both ruling and opposition parties had agreed that the Gulen elements are behind fabricating the two cases.<sup>10</sup> Oppositions' criticism against the Gulen elements in 2012 Ergenekon trials was vindicated when a large number of the accused were acquitted by the Supreme Courts of appeal.<sup>11</sup>

### **International Reaction**

Most of the countries have quickly rejected the coup attempt and expressed their support for the elected government but some reactions from Turkey's crucial allies carried a different message. The first American reaction came from Secretary of State John Kerry in early hours of the coup attempt from Moscow in which he hoped for "peace, stability and continuity" in Turkey, a reaction which was not clear enough. The Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in the same media interaction with his American counterpart John Kerry declined to comment citing the lack of latest details of what was happening there.<sup>12</sup> The late night readout of President Obama's call with Secretary John Kerry said that "President and Secretary agreed that all parties in Turkey should support the democratically-elected government of Turkey", a clarity which was absent in Kerry's initial reaction made from the Russian capital.<sup>13</sup>

In the next two days, Turkish media and politicians have widely criticised the American hand behind the coup and stepped up their demand for extradition of Fethullah Gulen from the US. After Erdogan-Putin telephonic conversation on 17 July, Obama called Erdogan on 19 July in which he showed his administration's willingness "to provide appropriate assistance".<sup>14</sup> But there came another controversial statement by State Secretary John Kerry published by *the Washington Post* that Turkey's NATO membership could be in jeopardy, though immediately denied by the US embassy in Ankara.<sup>15</sup> Harsh statements from Turkish politicians and government officials followed accusing the US of sheltering the "terrorist" Gulen.<sup>16</sup>

For Turkey's Western critics, Turkey has become a liability for NATO and America.<sup>17</sup> Western patience with Turkey seems to have already reached its limit as the American Enterprise, an important American think tank, had anticipated a powerful military coup against the Erdogan

government in March 2016.<sup>18</sup> Turkey has been left isolated on key issues of its immediate security; Syrian civil war, coalition against Islamic State, Kurdish militancy and refugee crisis in Europe.

All this has happened at a time when Turkey has been in the process of reconfiguring its foreign policy after its prolonged Syrian conundrum. The new government led by Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has come after Ahmet Davutoglu lost his support in the AK party's key decision-making central committee in May 2016. Within a short span of time, Binali Yildirim has taken steps towards normalising relations with Israel and Russia in order to expand Turkey's "circle of friends" a new nomenclature used by him to rationalise his moves.<sup>19</sup> This is why both Russian and Iranian officials have abstained from criticizing Turkey's post-coup purges on pro-Gulen media and civil society members and military officials.

### **Anti-Gulen Crackdown**

For Turkey's NATO allies, post-coup purges have become another flash point as their statements have demanded Turkey to "respect democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms."<sup>20</sup> Erdogan's proposal to bring capital punishment back has forced the European Union to say that such move will close the doors of European Union for Turkey. According to *the Hurriyet Daily News*, the Turkish government has suspended a total 8,777 officials from duty since 15 July 2016.<sup>21</sup> At least 42 journalists accused of having supported the coup attempt, have got arrest warrants issued against them. According to *Daily Sabah*, at least 100 judges from the Supreme Court of Appeals and 34 members of the Council of State, another high-ranking judicial authority and hundreds of judges from lower courts as well as 737 prosecutors have been detained so far. From the military, 143 generals have been arrested and 3,168 military officers from lower ranks and 736 military cadets were also arrested. Some 918 police officers were also detained while 825 public officials including governors were among those arrested.<sup>22</sup> Among the main targets of recent anti-coup purges are media professionals, human right activists and public figure sympathetic to Gulen and his movement. As of now 130 media have been shut down in which there are 3 news agencies, 16 TV channels, 23 radio stations, 45 newspapers, 15 magazines and 29 publishing houses, accused to be affiliated with the Gulen movement.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey's deteriorating security situation have helped Erdogan to strengthen his grip on power, even without having an executive presidency. Turkey faces greater risks of more political

polarisation after Erdogan uses this coup as an excuse to concentrate more power in his hands through emergency laws.

The political crisis is accompanied with more economic woes as investors' confidence is shaken by the failed coup attempt and Standard and Poor (S&P) has cut down Turkey's credit rating, though contested by other agencies.<sup>24</sup> After Russian jet was shot down near the Syrian border, Russian tourists were stopped and Turkish trucks carrying vegetables to Russia were stranded indefinitely followed by several harsh sanctions imposed by the Russian government. Annual growth of the Turkish economy was reduced to 3.5 percent in 2015-2016.<sup>25</sup> Bloomberg quoted the Russian Federal Customs Service that trade between Russia and Turkey fell by 57.2 percent in the first five months of 2016 compared with a year earlier, to \$6.1 billion.<sup>26</sup> Market observers suggest that an authoritarian regime in Turkey is the biggest risk factor for investors. Turkey's economy is sensitive "to any sudden shifts in investors' sentiments towards a country which has long run a bloated current account deficit".<sup>27</sup>

As the coup attempt failed because of a successful mass mobilization by the AKP government, Erdogan, and his party's immediate popularity is on a rise. Both AKP and its opponents are claiming their share in the success and hence a temporary sense of euphoria is prevailing and a common ground is being sought among all parties. Recent meetings between President Erdogan and opposition leaders can be seen mutually beneficial. But the ongoing wide spread purge will soon create a dividing line between Erdogan and the opposition parties. The failed coup attempt is an opportunity for President Erdogan to choose between his personal ambitions and Turkey's declining economic and political clout in the region and among its own Western allies. It remains to be seen which path he will choose.

What is not sufficiently recognized by most of the Turkey's Western allies is the fact that Fethullah Gulen and his Hizmet movement have lost most of its supporters inside Turkey's polarised political spectrum. In 2000 Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit had shielded Gulen from the army chief of staff General Huseyin Kivrikoglu who had always publicly criticised the Gulen movement for infiltrating the system.<sup>28</sup> From 2002 to 2012, the AKP as a religious conservative party was the natural ally of the Gulen movement and it had faced numerous accusations of being in complacency with the Gulen movement. At the present juncture, there is no place left in the Turkish political spectrum where the Gulen movement may find support for its case.

The way Turkey's political parties are united in demanding the US government to extradite Fethullah Gulen has created a new political narrative where defending Gulen and criticizing Erdogan in the same sentence will only strengthen Erdogan's domestic agenda. In this background, Erdogan's effort to reset his failing foreign policy is directed at finding more friends among its immediate neighbourhood, Russia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq without losing much of what has been achieved in Europe.

### **Conclusion**

In the short term, an extreme sense of insecurity, fear of aftershocks i.e. more coup attempts, are projected as the main reason behind the declaration of a state of emergency and blanket crack down on Gulen-affiliated individuals and institutions. The declaration was opposed by CHP and HDP, but it was not seriously challenged as it had strong backing from Turkey's nationalist civil society and political group like MHP. For the next three months under the emergency laws, the government will remain focused on its agenda of "de-gulenification" of the system, which, many fear will include all potential challenges to Erdogan and his political rivals.

The longer the anti-Gulen operation goes, the higher will be its political cost. Whether AKP government will be able to shut down and discredit the Gulen movement completely depends on its ability to convince through a meaningful dialogue a large number of people who had followed Gulen for religious and spiritual purposes. As the recent crackdown has no place for dialogue with Gulen supporters, his spiritual and intellectual presence will remain longer than Erdogan and his government expect to disappear. With more mass arrests or suspensions from public offices can only deepen the political unrest in the country as the members of the affected families have to find an alternative source of income and dignity they have lost in this operation. Internationally, Turkey's relations with its Western allies are facing serious criticism on a range of issues. US's cooperation with Kurdish group PYD in Syria, shelter to Fethullah Gulen and a prolonged Syrian crisis has frustrated Turkey's ruling dispensation. Western response to the coup attempt may only strengthen the disenchantment. In this context, a new foreign policy narrative to think beyond NATO by mending ties with Russia, Iran and Israel may emerge, particularly when such a policy could provide Turkey an immediate relief to its economic woes.

Given that Turkey has already exhausted its resources and energy on the crises at its Syrian-Iraqi borders, and Turkey does not have enough internal or external support to continue

the status quo, the emerging recalibration was most expected and perhaps the only option. It means that the Syrian civil war, Kurdish militancy and war on Islamic State will have a more decisive Turkish response in the next coming months. If this is going to be a scenario, Erdogan's authoritarian ambitions will be the only risk to this process and a power struggle within AK party resumes anew.

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*Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

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