

Turkey's Disaster - Erdoğan, Gülen, Military, Kurds and the end of "Islamic liberalism"

Monday 1 August 2016, by [THOMAS Duncan](#), [TUGAL Cihan](#) (Date first published: 23 July 2016).

The coup against Erdoğan failed, but that doesn't mean democracy was preserved.

Last week ended with a military coup in Turkey. Turkish forces shut down Istanbul's two main bridges; Atatürk airport was captured; and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tried desperately to rally his supporters via FaceTime. After a bloody year featuring fraught elections, sporadic terrorist attacks, and war against Kurdish militants in the country's east, it appeared as if he may have lost control.

But the situation was quickly turned around. The putchists had acted prematurely, and failed to gain key military or popular support. By the end of the weekend, Erdoğan's countercoup was in full swing. In addition to a three-month state of emergency, the president suspended the European Convention on Human Rights and began conducting sweeping purges of the military — which included high-ranking officers key to the war in Kurdistan — and public offices. Erdoğan is riding his newfound veneer of democratic legitimacy and the lack of clarity around who, exactly, planned the coup to consolidate power and isolate his enemies.

Who were the rebels, and what were their motivations? Why has Turkey mutated from the West's model Middle East state into one ruled by an increasingly unstable and illiberal party? Did the United States know about the coup? What will Erdoğan do next?

To understand these questions and more Jacobin's Duncan Thomas spoke to Cihan Tuğal, who has studied the "Islamic liberalism" of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). We speak about the AKP's relationship to the military, the nature of the anti-coup popular mobilization, and the future of Turkish democracy.

Duncan Thomas - The coup seems to have been decisively defeated. Who would the leaders of the coup have been hoping to gain support from, and why did it fail to receive this? Who were their potential allies within the political establishment? Did they have any plan for securing this support other than trying to strike a swift knockout blow?

Cihan Tugal - There was at best a loose Kemalist "sentiment" in favor of the coup in its first few hours, but as the attempt came to be associated with Fethullah Gülen, the sentiment died away. And that loose sentiment never bordered on street action in favor of the coup, as the latter's nature was unclear from the beginning.

One telling indicator of this lack of enthusiasm was the coverage of (Kemalist stronghold) Halk TV during the coup's first half hour, between around 11 and 11:30 PM. One could perhaps read

glimmers of hope on the faces of the TV personnel, but the retired soldiers they contacted for commentary all spoke fiercely against the coup attempt.

In the following hours, the (Kemalist) Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, also condemned the coup. In short, there was no elite or popular, military or civilian action, even among most Kemalists. This suggests that the generals acted with great panic and did not have a solid, well-thought-out plan.

We should also note a generational divide in the Kemalist camp. I personally observed that some of Halk TV's older audience members were surprised to see the channel's ambivalence. They were sure this was another "progressive" coup in the mold of May 27, 1960.

Their children and grandchildren, by contrast, either shared the ambivalence of mainstream Kemalist outlets or were outright hostile to the coup. These are the people who participated en masse in the Gezi Revolt. Their lack of enthusiasm for a coup that initially presented itself as Kemalist is a good sign for the future.

Erdoğan has accused the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, who you have already mentioned, of being behind the coup; Gülen, meanwhile, claims (perhaps rather improbably) that Erdoğan himself may have staged the whole thing.

Can you tell us something of the history between Erdoğan and Gülen, and hazard a guess as to who really directed the coup, and why they chose this moment to act? Had there been any indication that such a plot was underway, and why do you think a section of the military chose to move against the government?

The relations between Erdoğan and Gülen have a dramatic history. The mixture of hostility and cooperation, clash and merger, is baffling. Gülen's origins are in the Nur movement, an important modernizing Islamist strand inspired by the cleric-activist Said-i Nursî's writings.

Nur communities are known for their proximity to the established center-right. Gülen's following is one among many such communities, but is distinguished by its emphasis on nationalism, science, and integration with the Western world.

Just as the Gülen community did in its initial years, the National Outlook movement [a religiously conservative group which formed a base among pious provincial businessmen and farmers, and to which Erdoğan previously belonged] definitively broke off from the center-right and founded Turkey's first major Islamist party, the National Order Party (MNP). In its first two decades, the MNP perceived Gülen and his followers to be dangerous pawns of secular forces.

Hostilities reached a climax in the mid-1990s, when Gülen resisted the rise of the Islamist movement in general and the Welfare Party (RP) in particular [another offshoot of the National Outlook movement, the RP combined a contradictory openness to a free-market economy with an "Owenite" collectivism articulated through Islamic language and morals]. A hot-button issue back then was Islamic covering. Gülen attempted to take the steam off the mobilization against the veiling ban in universities by issuing a religious decree to the effect that covering one's head is a marginal detail (teferruat) in Islam. Gülenists later sided with the hodgepodge coalition government created by the anti-Islamist coup of 1997.

However, the same coup ultimately cracked down so heavily on Gülenists that, around the year 2000, they decided to side with the Islamists. Meanwhile, after the debacle of the 1997 coup (which led to the closure of the Welfare Party), Islamists had started to think that Gülen's project of

infiltrating the secular state worked much better than confronting it.

This response to the 1997 coup resulted in disturbances in the Virtue Party (FP, which had replaced the Welfare Party after the latter was shut down). Erdoğan's followers disowned the National Outlook movement, split from old-style Islamists, and co-established the AKP with Gülenists.

The AKP was a curious creature from the beginning. Due to its previously confrontational cadres, it carried the credibility of Islamism's anti-elitist, anti-establishment message. Yet at least on the surface, it subscribed to Gülenism: just like the latter, it only put an Islamic veneer on a standard center-rightist package.

During the 2000s, the alliance went so deep that it resembled a merger. It had become difficult to tell who in the ranks of the AKP was an ex-Islamist and who a Gülenist. It appeared, quite deceptively, that as their strategies and ideologies merged, so did their cadres. However, the two groups were simultaneously fighting a bitter war over the spoils of power (cadres, public bids, etc.). Ultimately, tensions surfaced over the Kurdish and Palestinian issues.

The fight became explicit as the Gülen community capitalized on the anti-government sentiment during and after the Gezi Revolt. The clearest example of this was when, using its power in the media and the judiciary, it attempted to file high-profile corruption cases that could bring down the government. Erdoğan declared war, and he has been cleansing the country of Gülenists ever since.

We should be very cautious about guessing the actors of the recent coup, as there is a lot of misinformation in circulation. Nonetheless, given what we suspect, the coup attempt seems to be a rash move on the part of Gülenists, as a last-minute preemptive attack to stop the largest purge so far. Rumor has it that this was scheduled for 4 AM on July 16; the coup was launched at 10 PM on July 15.

Relations between the military as a whole and AKP also seem have swung back and forth since the latter came to government. We've seen attempts to curb the military's power — with arrests of many senior commanders from 2007 on, as well as the removal of legal protections for coup leaders in the 2010 constitutional changes, for example.

But more recently, some of those commanders have been released, and the military have been given more leeway to conduct the war in Kurdistan as they see fit — the implication being that the army was regaining its prestige and power within the state. What accounts for these sharp shifts?

It is true that the AKP has carried out great purges (of alleged Kemalist-putschists) in the military, but this should not lead us to the impression that it is anti-militarist. Since Islamists do not have many military cadres, the party staffed the vacant positions with Gülenists. Erdoğan did not necessarily trust these people, but still resorted to them heavily in his fight against the Kurds.

There has also been another (equally deceptive) peace agreement of sorts between the party and the military in the last year or so. The arrested Kemalist generals were released; and the party glorified the generals fighting on the Kurdish front.

Despite this rapprochement, there was and still is discontent among the military elite and the rank-and-file. Yet most of the military did not join the putschists; some generals and divisions reputed to be strongly Kemalist and generally pro-coup went further and publicly criticized the coup as it was unfolding. This strongly suggests that such figures had indications of a coming action and did not want to be associated with it. They possibly felt that neither the timing nor the leadership was right.

But would their natural inclination be to support a coup in different circumstances? Do

you think the AKP might overreach itself in response to the coup and provoke another down the line?

Can we expect Erdoğan to prepare for this eventuality by, for example, building up the capabilities of paramilitary forces and militant groups within society more loyal to him?

Yes, another coup might occur, but it is impossible to predict when. It might be in a few months, years, or decades. AKP representatives are already calling people to arm themselves.

I am sure there will be some serious paramilitary preparation on their part; police forces are also bound to expand further. Through such calls they want to spread militarization deeper, suggesting that what they anticipate (perhaps even desire) is not just another coup, but outright civil war.

A major factor in the defeat of the coup appears to have been popular mobilization. Clearly, this was a mixture of actual AKP supporters, and people wanting to defend the principle of electoral democracy more generally, no matter how distorted that has become under Erdoğan. Every major political party, including those on the Left like the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), have also condemned the coup.

Yet this temporary alliance against the coup is clearly riddled with tensions. Erdoğan and the AKP are already using the coup to cement their position and further attack civil liberties, all while presenting themselves as the embodiment of democracy. The popular mobilizations which took place have also seen clashes between militant Islamists, fascist groups, and the police on one hand, and residents of neighborhoods known as leftist and minority strongholds on the other.

Do you think Erdoğan will succeed in his crackdown?

The AKP's police forces fought the decisive battles, but the mass action seems to have demoralized especially the lower-rank soldiers. It appears that the putschists did not have the time to convince the foot soldiers. They just told them that the military's occupation of bridges and government buildings was due to a terrorist threat or a routine drill. When these rank-and-file soldiers encountered civilian resistance, they were disoriented. The first series of surrenders initiated with them.

However, the impact of civilian resistance should not be exaggerated. One thoughtful report by a political journalist suggests that civilians mattered to the degree that the clashes between the two armed sides allowed them to.

Except a few staunchly anti-Islamist outlets, the media initially presented anti-coup protesters as defenders of democracy. However, it soon turned out that Islamist slogans outweighed democratic slogans throughout the mass action. This dimension of the protests finally become clearer during the third day after the attempted coup.

And it goes much further than slogans. The same masses have attacked Kurds, Alevis, and alcohol-consumers, as you have pointed out. Of course, these people had nothing to do with the coup attempt. The pro-government mobs knew this, but deliberately used the opportunity to attack all of their enemies.

The government is now poised to follow the lead of the mobs. Close to fifty thousand public personnel are to be purged and the number might grow [1]. The chance that even a fraction of these people are seriously linked to a coup that was so poorly organized is, to say the least, extremely low. In all likelihood, many of them are not even Gülenists.

Erdoğan's reaction to the coup is just the latest manifestation of his increasingly authoritarian rule. You cover this in your book [2], which describes the breakdown of the "liberal-conservative" Islamism once celebrated for its commitment to neoliberal economics and an apparent willingness to operate within formal bourgeois democracy. You theorize the rise of this model through the Gramscian concept of a "passive revolution."

Can you explain the logic behind this process, how the AKP came to lead it, and why it seems to be degenerating into a more brazen authoritarianism?

The groundwork for the passive revolution was laid by a military regime in 1980. The junta crushed the Left and built a new official ideology based on free markets, conservative Islam, and nationalism. Turgut Özal's new center-right popularized and democratized the military's package.

By the 1990s, however, free-market economics had proven ineffective; simultaneously, Kurdish resistance destabilized the country. Islamist opposition emerged as a strong voice and promised a just economy and the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question.

After an Islamist coalition was overthrown by the military, the neoliberal wing of the Islamist party split from the main body. It combined forces with the center-right and Gülenists against the military (and whatever remained of the Left), and this resulted in the formation of the AKP.

Business and other liberal circles believed this could usher in an even more popularly supported version of the Özal years, which had benefited them immensely. Western powers shared the same belief.

At this point, the Gülenists joined the former Islamists, believing that the latter ultimately came to adopt their ideology and strategy. All of these actors wholeheartedly supported the AKP for around ten years, during which neoliberalism seemed to work miracles.

However, as the economy started to slow after the global financial crisis [3], the AKP embarked on re-Islamizing its base (which itself had liberalized and partially de-Islamized). The regime also sharpened its Islamic and nationalist credentials as it became frustrated with its faltering negotiations with the Kurdish resistance.

After 2011, the Arab Spring further boosted its hopes that Islamism (rather than liberal-conservatism) would be a better foreign policy orientation too. The Gezi Revolt then sealed the fate of Islamic liberalism: Erdoğan and his circle decided, given the disorder in the region and the strengthening opposition at home, that they could no longer play the democracy game.

Passive revolutions are essentially "revolution-restorations." The AKP had restored the 1980 package (neoliberal, nationalist conservatism) through absorbing revolutionary Islamist cadres and discourses.

However, as interwar Italy — the classical case — demonstrates, passive revolutions are extremely unstable, as combining revolution and restoration is explosive by nature. They are full of (structured) surprises. Italy's passive revolution was one of the factors that led to the most destructive war in history. Turkey's has so far destroyed Syria, but more is in stock.

Can you expand a little? Do you see the potential for direct confrontations between Turkey and other states in the region?

The Turkish stance on Syria was extremely militaristic. The regime wanted to push the West into a total war, but it failed. I don't think it will embark on such adventures alone (and a possible war

partnership with Gulf states is not reassuring enough, obviously). Hence the comparison to Mussolini's Italy: Mussolini also scrambled around for coalition partners before he decisively sided with Germany. He would have been happy to share the spoils of British imperialism rather than attack the latter head-on.

In much the same way, the AKP sought integration with the Western world for a long time, though we seem to have reached the point of no return this week. Despite their ideological compatibility, Germany and Italy were not "destined" to be partners. Along the same lines, Turkey is more likely to foment a major war than to lead one.

We've seen US secretary of state John Kerry, as well as EU spokespeople, make statements aimed at restraining the AKP's repressive counter-coup. Assuming that they are not overly concerned with democracy per se, can we infer from this that they are worried about Turkey's stability? If so, how right are they to be concerned?

Among the government's supporters, there is a sincere belief that this coup was organized by the United States. This might be a stretch, but Gülen is so tightly integrated into the American establishment that it is difficult to believe all official agencies in the United States were completely ignorant of the coup plan (but then, the same is as true of the Turkish intelligence services — did they know nothing about what was going on, given that AKP has been publicly obsessed with Gülenist conspiracies? Weren't these soldiers under tight surveillance?).

The United States and the European Union could have lived with a Gülen coup; equally, they can now live with the AKP's counter-coup just as well. However, the latter has the potential to get out of (Western) control. They are right to be concerned.

It is in this way that we have another interwar Italy in the making. At present, just like its interwar predecessor, Turkey cannot sever all ties with the hegemonic world powers without finding a patron more powerful than itself. Perhaps that's the real reason it is courting Putin.

Another prominent issue in Turkey has been the renewal of the Turkish state's brutal war against the Kurds. How significant is it that a large proportion of the coup's backers (or at least, of those detained by Erdoğan on the basis of such an accusation) were on the front lines of this war? Many leading officers of the war in Kurdistan have been detained; the air force was also involved in the coup, as were many of the ordinary soldiers involved in the war.

What does this tell us about support for the conflict within the military, and what does it mean for the state's ability to continue to wage the war at such an intensity?

Initial reports indicate that many names implicated in the anti-Kurdish military operations of the last few years are now in custody. At this point, it is not clear how Erdoğan will sustain his war against the Kurds, as the military will inevitably be weakened and demoralized after this failed coup.

The government is not trying to appease their worries: even generals who have criticized the coup are under suspicion and attack, with many interrogated. It is most likely that the party will use this as an opportunity to marginalize all of its opponents in the military. How can such an emaciated military fight a seasoned guerrilla movement?

The chances are that Turkey will have to depend increasingly on Ahrar al-Sham and other jihadi groups to act as substitutes for the Turkish military. These tendencies could result in the further Salafi-jihadization of the Middle East.

Such a turn towards paramilitary forces, together with the mobilization of the masses, sounds very much like a step towards something representing classical fascism – and you frequently make comparisons between Turkey and interwar Italy.

Notwithstanding the fact that phenomena like fascism never repeat themselves in precisely the same historical form, do you think this is a real danger in Turkey?

There are bound to be differences. Most obviously, Turkey is very unlikely to become as corporatist as Italy. The last decade's enthusiasm for the market economy is not sustainable, but it is not just going to evaporate. Turkish neo-fascism, if ever there is one, is going to be much more "chic" and much less "anticapitalist" than its forefather.

Likewise, the role of religion is going to be much more central, but the regime has been increasing the weight of nationalism (with racist overtones) in its interpretation of Islam for a while now. Indeed, the fascist cults of violence and "the leader" are not at all incompatible with a comparatively more religious nationalism.

Finally, the rhetorical commitment to democracy is likely to last much longer, now further entrenched by "anti-coup" discourse and action. Still, we should never think of fascism and certain forms of democracy as antithetical.

Unlike Spain (which never became truly fascist), democratic mass action and fascistization were embedded in each other from the get-go in Italy and Germany: fascism was a popular movement, at least in part built up within formal democratic norms, even though fascists deeply distrusted (and ultimately undermined) democracy.

Both domestically and in relation to regional politics, the coup and the AKP's reaction signal extremely worrying times ahead. At least in the short term, it is difficult to see a positive outcome.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 7.23.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/turkey-erdogan-coup-gulen-kemalist-kurdish-war/>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/07/19/erdogan-targets-more-than-50000-in-purge-after-failed-turkish-coup.html>

[2] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2081-the-fall-of-the-turkish-model>

[3] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-economy-bankruptcy-idUSKCN0XV0EF>