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Erdogan Is Strengthened by the Failed Coup, But Turkey Is the Loser

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JULY 22, 2016

The failed military coup is a disaster for Turkey, but its success would have been a far greater calamity. If the plotters had killed or captured President Recep Tayyip Erdogan then other parts of the armed forces might have joined them, but a civil war would have been inevitable as the security forces split and Erdogan's supporters fought back.

The disaster is that it will now be much more difficult for Turks to resist Erdogan establishing a monopoly of power. By resisting the coup as the leader of a democratically-elected government, he has enhanced his legitimacy. Moreover, all opposition to his rule can be labelled as support for terrorism and punished as such.

“Human rights and democracy will be weaker and they were already in a bad way before the coup,” says a critic of Erdogan, who does not want his name published, adding that it is difficult for him to criticise Erdogan today while he is under threat from military conspirators. He has no doubt that the attempted putsch was carried out by the followers of Fethullah Gulen, who has lived in the US since 1999. Leaving aside the confessions of the plotters, which may have been forced, only the Gulenists had a network of adherents capable of staging an uprising in so many units of the security forces. “Fethullah did not help us, he killed us,” says the Turkish commentator bitterly. “He left us totally in the hands of Erdogan.”

He says that the Gulenists operate in two different ways: they have a moderate public face with schools, universities, media and business associations, but they also have always had a secret organisation devoted to taking positions of power within the military, police and security services. As long ago as 1987, the movement was being investigated for infiltrating military colleges. It is now being compared to the Roman Catholic organisation Opus Dei, notorious for its links to Franco and other right wing governments, though a better analogy might be a secretive cult with a charismatic leader.

The coup went off half-cock. It was staged prematurely because of fear of an imminent purge of Gulenists in the military. Analysts have been explaining how badly organised the attempt was and how it could never have succeeded.

But the initial response of the government to the putsch was equally cack-handed, with Erdogan saying that he first heard something was amiss from his brother-in-law who phoned him between 4 and 4.30pm on 15 July to say that soldiers were stopping cars next to the Beylerbeyi Palace in Istanbul.

Erdogan's account of what happened next is worth quoting in order to convey the atmosphere of confusion in the first hours of the abortive takeover.

He says that his brother-in-law "was telling me that soldiers were actually cutting off streets, and they were not allowing cars to proceed to take to the bridge. When I got the news, initially I did not believe that this was happening and I called the head of national security, the head of national intelligence, I could not reach him. I called the chief of staff of the armed forces, I could not reach him, they were not in a position to be able to answer their phones... Then I tried to contact the prime minister, and although with some difficulty, we were able to get into contact."

It was only almost four hours later, at 8 pm, that Erdogan made plans to act by contacting the media – quite long enough for the pro-coup forces to have eliminated him. If victory goes to the side that makes the least mistakes, then it was a close run thing.

Aside from their organisational failings, the plotters made a miscalculation in imagining that, because Turks are deeply divided between supporters and opponents of Erdogan, the latter night side with anybody trying to get rid of him by physical force.

In the event, the plotters found no support because people felt, as one Kurdish activist was quoted as saying, that "the worst politician is better than the best general."

Much now depends on the extent to which Erdogan sees the failure of the coup as a heaven-sent excuse to remove all who do not obey him. The temptation is clearly there: some 60,000 soldiers, judges, prosecutors, civil servants and teachers have been detained, arrested or sacked.

All 3.3m civil servants in Turkey have been told to stay in their jobs, presumably so they can be investigated. The crackdown under the State of Emergency appears to be spreading well beyond the circle of those implicated in the coup or connected to the Gulenists.

Overreaction by the state may be deliberately contrived in order to benefit from the crisis, but there is also real fear mixed with paranoia that the coup is not entirely over.

Supporters of the Government tweeted yesterday that there might be a second attempt and some military units have been confined to their bases. Meanwhile the coup is being presented as a symbol of evil as was Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 in English political tradition. Public demonstrations of anti-coup feeling are being demanded by the state, with people asked to attend daily demonstrations and actors in Istanbul being asked to produce an anti-coup video.

The next few weeks will tell if Erdogan is going target all dissent and further divide a deeply divided country. He may have a difficulty in pursuing the war against Kurdish guerrillas in south-east Turkey and, at the same time, purging the Second Army that is meant to be fighting them and whose commanding general is under arrest. It might be sensible to conciliate the Kurds, with whom Erdogan was negotiating not so long ago, but his combative political instincts are more likely to lead him to opt for continuing confrontation.

Islamic State will benefit from the new political landscape because security forces will be tracking Gulenist sleepers rather than Isis cells. Isis will gain from the anti-American mood in Turkey post-coup because the Government and much of the population are convinced that the US was implicated in the attempt. Whatever happens to the Turkish demand that the US hand over Gulen, Turks are convinced of a US role, citing as evidence Mr Gulen's long presence outside Philadelphia. Isis will seek the support of a widening anti-US constituency in Turkey. Relations between Ankara and Washington were not good before; they are about to get worse.

Erdogan emerges politically stronger from the crisis, but he rules a weakened Turkish state. The army and state institutions are being hollowed out by purges and loyalty, not competence, becomes the test for advancement. Turkish involvement in Syria has produced only failure: sectarian and ethnic warfare between Sunni and Shia, Kurd and non-Kurd is infecting Turkey.

Erdogan could use the coup to unite Turks or, alternatively, exploit it in a way that will further divide them. It is difficult to feel optimistic.