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Turkey's Attempted Coup: The Collapse Of The Ideal Islamic Democracy

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Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ruled Turkey for more than a decade. He should be enjoying his time of triumph. He towers above the political system, able to create and dismiss governments at will.

The mayor turned prime minister turned president created a new, victorious Islamic movement. He eradicated the gaggle of old, squabbling secular parties. He promoted more business-friendly policies, generating prosperity for those previously left behind. And he won support from women, academics, and liberals as he defanged the military, which long was the ultimate arbiter of Turkish politics.

Yet his country almost crashed and burned a week ago. Elements of the army and air force attempted a coup d'état. For a time state television was occupied. Planes bombed the parliament. Tanks blocked the bridge which crosses the Bosphorus, sundering the land link between Europe and Asia. Soldiers and police battled in the streets. Loyalists' planes attacked renegades' helicopters and tanks. Army forces besieged the intelligence agency's headquarters. Insurgents detained the army chief of staff and other top officers. Civilians confronted the coup's foot soldiers.

Nearly 300 people were killed and almost 1,500 were injured. So far tens of thousands have been arrested or fired. Erdogan promised revenge against those involved, who will "pay a heavy price for their treason."

No doubt they will, since the thin-skinned Erdogan long has been making even mild critics suffer for their alleged sins. To tame the military his government previously tried hundreds of military officers and others in mass trials involving improbably fantastic conspiracies, such as the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. After the police and prosecutors had the temerity to investigate members of his government and family for corruption, he purged justice personnel. He now is targeting Kurdish parliamentarians for allegedly supporting "terrorism" by Kurdish separatists.

Turkey is one of the least friendly nations for independent journalists. Many have been jailed and an estimated 900 have been forced from their jobs. The government simply seized television stations and newspapers from private owners. Around 2000 people, including students and even a beauty queen, have been prosecuted for criticizing Erdogan. His government periodically

targets internet freedom, which provides one of the few remaining means to organize against his authoritarian rule. (And, ironically, which he used to call his supporters to the streets to defeat the coup.)

There were at least a few Turkish citizens as well as foreign observers who privately hoped the putsch would end a political experiment gone awry. The briefly constituted junta announced that it had seized power “to reinstall the constitutional order, democracy, human rights and freedoms, to ensure that the rule of law once again reigns in the country, for last and order to be reinstated.” Worthy objectives for an increasingly desperate Turkey today, and, in the view of some, if it took the military to remove an authoritarian Islamist from power, so be it. After all, that’s what the Turkish armed forces did for years. Why not again?

Unfortunately, irrespective of its claimed purpose, a coup may be the least likely vehicle for moving Turkey into a genuine liberal, democratic future. For instance, the coup that removed Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi from power in 2013 has been celebrated by some for dismantling that nation’s Muslim Brotherhood. However, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has turned into a modern pharaoh, unwilling to countenance the slightest opposition or criticism. People routinely disappear off the streets and the regime recently targeted human rights groups which monitor government practices. An activist who fought against torture for decades told me that the situation was much worse than under Sisi’s predecessor, Hosni Mubarak.

Equally appalling were the succession of Turkish hard and soft coups, the most recent in 1997, over the years. Those who look back nostalgically on earlier military seizures of power ignore the ugly reality. For instance, the 1960 coup led to the execution of the popularly elected prime minister and other officials and imprisonment of thousands. The military enforced secularism, forbidding even modest expressions of religious faith, and also suppressed basic human rights. One could lose one’s job and face prison for simply criticizing the dominant authoritarian philosophy originally imposed by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey’s founder. Ankara participated in NATO because it opposed the Soviet Union, not because it shared Western values.

Even if the latest coup attempt was well-intentioned, it is hard to see how it could have accomplished its professed ends. Today the public is well-organized and committed to democracy. Having provided Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) with a half dozen election victories since 2002, the Turkish people were never likely to quietly accept his ouster and the imposition of a hostile military regime. Even the three major opposition parties rallied against the attempted takeover.

Once the coup planners proved unable to arrest Erdogan and other government and party officials, shut down unauthorized communication, and block organized public protests, they lost any chance of prevailing. At most they could have triggered extended civil strife and perhaps civil war, as the armed forces confronted the vast majority of Turks. Even had his political opponents rallied to the junta, only use of great violence could have forced his strongholds across the Turkish heartland to submit.

Unfortunately, the botched coup is likely to accelerate the Erdogan government's race to the dictatorial bottom. There obviously are threats to be confronted, but he wanted far more power even before the attempted putsch. Erdogan now is likely to become more vindictive and paranoid. Never mind that he bears responsibility for the authoritarian policies and corrupt practices which have energized his most fervent opponents. Indeed, Erdogan's first inclination was to blame, without offering any evidence, the cleric Fethullah Gulen, a former ally who lives in self-imposed exile in the U.S. Whatever one thinks of the latter's philosophy, the 77-year-old is an unlikely mastermind of the military action.

Politics almost certainly will grow more polarized. Anger against those who struck at his rule may increase Erdogan's determination to turn the public square into an echo chamber for his praise, and intensify his extra-legal campaigns against other political parties. The government immediately dismissed nearly 2800 judges—apparently previously targeted for not being in thrall of Erdogan—in the coup's aftermath. Erdogan's supporters also could practice private revenge and vigilante justice against their opponents.

In fact, Erdogan might reap political advantage from the coup. His reemergence in Istanbul surrounded by crowds brought to mind Boris Yeltsin in 1991 facing down tanks in the old Soviet Union. At that moment Erdogan seemed to speak for all of Turkey. Other parties might feel greater pressure to work with him to deliver the super-majority which he needs to change the Constitution to expand his presidential powers. He also could call a snap election in hopes of winning that majority on his own.

Turkey's security is likely to suffer in the coup's aftermath. Erdogan's foreign policy of "zero problems" with Turkey's neighbors has almost completely backfired, yielding multiple crises. They may have been one factor in the military's strike on his government. As a result, he recently has begun retreating from confrontation. Ankara recently repaired relations with Israel and Russia and suggested the possibility of rapprochement with Syria. He especially needs to avoid problems with the military torn asunder.

Internal security may be a bigger challenge. The Erdogan government originally played footsie with the Islamic State, but several terrorist attacks in Turkey forced a crackdown. Moreover, he reignited the long fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and targeted Syrian Kurds to enlist nationalism as his electoral ally. Now, however, the military is badly damaged and faces internal disarray for an extended period of time.

Ankara is a difficult ally for America, but the Obama administration took the right approach, immediately backing Turkey's elected government. Turkey, like Egypt three years ago, offered no good choices. Democracy is yielding ever more illiberal outcomes, with Erdogan seemingly determined to accrue Putinesque powers. Yet military rule could succeed only by killing and imprisoning on a large scale. And a successful junta was likely to produce a society with even less liberty and respect for human rights. Moreover, the hypocrisy would be particularly glaring if the U.S., a government formally committed to the expansion of democracy, advocated the ouster of a democratically elected government (rather as in Ukraine, though that was more by street revolution than coup).

Recep Tayyip Erdogan is an increasingly undemocratic president elected democratically. He should be removed and his government should be ousted—but by Turkey’s voters, not its military. He emerges from the latest crisis stronger. If his arrogance did not exceed his wisdom, he would use the failed coup as an opportunity to address the substantial portion of the population which has come to loath and even fear him. He should reclaim his lost mantle for liberal and democratic change.

Someday Turkey will be free. Hopefully a military coup will not be necessary to make it so.

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