



Difficult time for Turkey

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Why must a coup in Turkey attract so much attention? There are many reasons. Turkey is Europe's second most populous country in the Western alliance¹. It has the second largest number of defence personnel in NATO². Most of all, it is the buffer between Europe and the Middle East mess created by centuries of colonization, first by the Ottomans and later by ruinous Western intervention. Turkey is where refugees for Europe are supposed to stop (they don't). It is also where states with inviolate borders begin. And it is the only functioning state in the region that can stand up to the frenzy next door, in Syria and by ISIS.

Causes of the coup

In a story as old as history, the coup attempt followed a predictable script. The plotters' stated reason was to restore 'constitutional order, human rights, and freedom'³. They wanted also rule of law and public order. From what is known so far, the coup plotters feared another purge in the Army by Mr. Erdogan⁴. High ideals may have disguised self-interest.

However, not much is known about the details of the coup attempt. There must certainly be other reasons. We may only surmise. Turkey has been thoroughly embroiled in the Syrian crisis supporting the rebels against President Asad. On 13 July 2016, before the coup, in a complete turnaround of Turkish policies so far, Prime Minister Yildirim 'hinted it may normalize relations with Damascus'⁵. Government later modified this statement. The Turkish President also hinted at naturalization of some of the two million Syrian refugees. This surprised many

¹ Wikipedia,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_European_countries_by_population

² Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member_states_of_ATO

³ The Economist in Turkey, a failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, July 15th, 2016

⁴ CNN: Why did the uprising happen now? July 18, 2016

⁵ The Guardian, Syrian rebels stunned as Turkey signals normalization of Damascus relations, 13 July 2016

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Turks most of whom cannot distinguish between nationalism and ethnicity⁶. With his usual insight in the affairs of the region, Robert Fisk, informs that the Army ‘was never going to remain compliant while ... (Mr. Erdogan) turned his neighbours into enemies and his country into a mockery of itself.’⁷ He further says that when Turkey became a conduit for Western arms to Syrian rebels ‘it, too, took the path of a failed state, its cities torn apart by massive bombs, its countryside infiltrated by the Islamists.’

Another likely cause could be concerns about AKP’s direction for the country. This is the preferred reason of Western analysts. Both Gulen followers and Ataturk secularists have reasons to worry about the country’s shift to the right as well as its role in the region. To succeed, the soldiers may have counted on the deep social and political divisions that these have caused. ‘Erdogan is loved and worshiped by a good half of the country. The other half detests him passionately’⁸, says CNN perhaps with some hype. The plotters may have weighed that the President’s quasi autocracy would bring them support from the left and liberals. That didn’t happen because the attempt to topple Mr. Erdogan was (reportedly) inept and because in previous purges the Army had been rid of officers hostile to the President. Also, under AKP, the economy has prospered and its benefits have been shared widely. Be that as it may, the reasons for the social divisions in Turkey are not about to go away.

Effect of the coup

The number of people killed during the night of the coup is estimated to be 294⁹. Turkey will feel its effect for some time. Regardless of who wins, in a turmoil the whole country loses. On the face of it, Mr. Erdogan’s action since may prove true that axiom. Hours into the coup attempt, he declared that the coup was ‘a gift from God’. Since then he has shown resolve and intent. To act quickly against the plotters, Turkey has declared a state of emergency. It also suspended implementation

⁶ Hurriyet Daily News, Turkey should hold referendum on offering citizenship to Syrians: CHP leader

⁷ Independent, Turkey’s coup may have failed – but history shows it won’t be long before another one succeeds, Robert Fisk, 16 July 2016

⁸ CNN: Why did the uprising happen now? July 18, 2016

⁹ The Telegraph, Turkey coup attempt: World leaders warn President Erdogan not to use uprising as excuse for crackdown as more than 6,000 arrested, 18 July 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/17/turkey-coup-plot-president-erdogan-rounds-up-thousands-of-soldie/>

of Europe's Human Rights convention¹⁰. An estimated 50,000 army men, judges, and teachers have been dismissed, suspended, or arrested¹¹. The arrested include over a hundred generals¹². In an army of 620,000, that number is excessively high.

Echoing the mission of the plotters, the emergency declaration seeks to remove threats to 'democracy, to the rule of law and to the freedoms of citizens'¹³. The purge of those opposed to the present government seems to be all encompassing. There is not much concern for the distinction between those who plotted the coup and those opposed to the government. It is a risky course to follow.

Turkey's financial indicators have taken a modest hit. The Lira has been volatile since the coup. It has both lost and gained in value¹⁴, though it has been in decline for about a year. A week after the coup, the stock index is 14% below its high on 15 July¹⁵. Political uncertainties seen in Moody's downgrading of Turkey will scare foreign investors.

There were major positives also. Risking their lives, the people came out in thousands to defy the soldiers. (Contrary to earlier visuals, the putsch was quite brutal¹⁶). Not all those who came out were AKP supporters. Political parties of all shades, some viscerally against the AKP, decried the coup. It is early to say how Mr. Erdogan's response will unite them all, or if he would at all.

Risks in the future

It is hard to rely on analyses since the coup. Turkish columnists accuse Western analysts as uninformed and clearly 'orientalist'. On the other hand, reading Turkish news makes it difficult to sift facts from conspiracies and bombast. One must rely on evidence; to the extent it is available.

There are two ways to look at Mr. Erdogan's aggressive action. There is always a danger that having failed this time, a fresh plot may be around the corner¹⁷, which the

¹⁰ Hurriyet Daily News, Turkey to temporarily suspend European Convention on Human Rights after coup attempt, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-temporarily-suspend-european-convention-on-human-rights-after-coup-attempt.aspx?pageID=238&nID=101910&NewsCatID=338>

¹¹ Washington Post, Turkey declares a state of emergency, July 20 2016.

¹² The News, Pakistan 112 generals, admirals, thousands of judges arrested, 19 July 2016, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/136001-112-generals-admirals-thousands-of-judges-arrested-in-Turkey>

¹³ Washington Post, Turkey declares a state of emergency, Loveday Morris and Hugh Naylor, July 20 2016.

¹⁴ XE.Com, <http://www.xe.com/currencycharts/?from=TRY&to=USD&view=1W>

¹⁵ Bloomberg, <http://www.bloomberg.com/quote/XU100:IND>

¹⁶ The Economist, After the coup, the counter coup, 23 July 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21702511-failed-putsch-was-bloodiest-turkey-has-seen-backlash-worrying-after-coup>

¹⁷ Independent, Turkey's coup may have failed – but history shows it won't be long before another one succeeds, Robert Fisk, 16 July 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/turkey-coup-erdogan-ankara-istanbul-military-army-turkey-s-coup-may-have-failed-but-history-shows-a7140521.html>

government must do everything to avert. Understandably, the government cannot accept any risk to constitutional rule.

But the scale of his action since the coup, suggests that Mr. Erdogan may use this as an opportunity also to overcome all opposition to his rule. Even Turkish analysts express concern. One analyst says that the coup aftermath “would unfortunately consolidate Erdoğan’s authoritarian rule. That of course does not bode well for Turkish democracy”¹⁸.

On occasions, Mr. Erdogan has ‘let slip’ his inner views about democracy. He considers pluralism and elections as the ‘vehicle’ to bring about ‘true Islamic order’. “Once I get to my stop, I’m getting off,” he is known to have said to Jordan’s King Abdullah¹⁹.

By refusing to grasp the grievances of a good part of the country, the government risks further division within. The AKP government’s vision of the state contrasts with that of Atatürk’s ideas for Turkey, which a large part of the country holds dear. AKP is moving Turkey away from a democracy with checks and balances to one that compromises individual rights and press freedom. There are supporters for both points of view and they may wish to fight until the matter is settled. Turkey may face this tension, for years²⁰.

Mr. Erdogan is a supreme strategist. It is possible that we are judging him too soon.

He probably knows that resistance to his government’s actions is greater than he cares to admit. He does not have an easy task on his hands. He has diehard supporters that embrace his conservative direction for Turkey and who only recently risked their lives for constitutional rule. On the other hand, he must include a wider range of opinions, even if they sharply differ with his views. He may be doing so already. Mr. Erdogan has been conciliatory towards the opposition social democrats (CHP) and pro-Kurdish HDP²¹.

¹⁸ Hurriyet Daily News, Why Europe can’t afford Turkey’s slide into authoritarian rule, BARÇIN YİNANÇ, Ankara

¹⁹ The Wall Street Journal, The Crisis of Political Islam, The Saturday Essay, Yaroslav Trofimov, July 22, 2016 and Harvard Political Review, Turkey’s Military Disconnect, Henry Sullivan Atkins, 23 July 2016

²⁰ Politico, What Caused the Turkish Coup Attempt, Ambassador Robert Pearson, 16 July 2016, most of the discussion in these lines are adapted from here

²¹ Hurriyet Daily News, Ruling AKP to join main opposition CHP’s anti-coup rally in Istanbul, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ruling-akp-to-join-main-opposition-chps-anti-coup-rally-in-istanbul.aspx?pageID=238&nID=101944&NewsCatID=338>

Turkey and the Syrian Crisis

Perhaps he is guided also by the Syrian crisis.

It is important to see what Turkey's approach to the Middle East crisis would be now. So far, Turkey, has supported Western interests in Syria, unclear as those may have been. Its position on ISIS, on the other hand, has been ambiguous, a policy that has come to haunt the country. The big question now is: Will Turkey remain active in Syria?

Turkey has been weakened greatly by its involvement in Syria. A turnaround now, as hinted by PM Yildirim, would invoke the wrath of the West. Staying in the fight would weaken it further and would continue to irritate the Army. By ridding the army of thousands of officers, Mr. Erdogan already may have limited its ability to play an effective role in the ME. He also plans to restructure the army and bring in 'fresh blood'²². This may have also demoralized the army.

The army is a fighting unit, but it also has deep seated group loyalty. Mr. Erdogan's widespread purge suggests one of two fears. If he is wrong about the scale of opposition to him in the army, he risks alienating an even larger number. If he is right about the opposition to his action, he has an army that he cannot trust. What bigger threat to stability can there be?

Perhaps he has already made the decision to no longer pursue an active role in Syria. This means a period of consolidation where he can reshape the Army and strengthen it again. This may well be his strategy to take the country into the future. We will know in the weeks and months to come. More importantly, he must, after the initial purge build bridges with the army. That may not be the only bridge for him to build.

He must also allay Western concerns about his actions. Turkey has been a NATO bastion for countries 'on the other side', communists until the eighties, Middle Eastern since. It is too important a country for the West to antagonize. Yet, Mr. Erdogan can, no more than Mr. Morsi of Egypt, count on Western support for constitutional rule. The West will as easily welcome an army takeover as they did in Egypt. He knows this only too well. Turkey has a rocky road ahead. Mr. Erdogan has involved Turkey in a high stakes game. His test is to repair the damage by taking everyone along.

²² Hurriyet Daily News, Turkey to reshuffle army earlier than planned after coup attempt

Parallels with Pakistan

Soon after the Turkish coup attempt and the response of the public to it, many pundits here drew needless comparisons with Pakistan. Such direct inferences are facile. Despite our common experience, there are many differences between the two countries in the evolution of their political institutions.

In fact, the coup attempt holds few immediate lessons for us. However, it offers a moment to reflect.

Unlike Turkey, where Islamist and secular ideas compete for political space, in Pakistan, the power structure is not a product of ideology or beliefs. Power sharing in Pakistan is a negotiated arrangement to accommodate interests of competing institutions. For that reason, competition among institutions is no longer a zero sum game. Negotiations take place continually with broad agreement over the areas of influence of respective players.

Mr. Erdogan's AKP is a product of political Islam²³. His support draws on beliefs and ideology that arouse emotions and diehard loyalty. A mix of pride, anti-West sentiments, and religion are the bases of his support. It is reinforced and widened by years of inclusive development and prosperity under Mr. Erdogan.

Our large political parties do not evoke the same degree of loyalty. For one, their agenda is political, not based on faith or destiny. Within this space, the leaders do not demonstrate high ideals or show good performance. In fact, their poor governance often makes them the object of derision.

In Pakistan, religious parties do not figure in the electorate's calculations. They usually do badly in elections. The expectations of Pakistanis for better conditions in the country, vacillate between the Army and civil governments. This changes every few years as each side disappoints with their governance.

In Turkey, there is rivalry between the secular deep state and Islamist parties²⁴. In Pakistan there is often an alliance. Religious forces, that have little popular support, are often vehicles for state institutions' back door power struggle.

Also, political forces are a lot more varied in Pakistan. As a diverse federation, lacking Turkey's ethnic sameness, regional and local parties also have a role to play. Their space

²³ The Wall Street Journal, The Crisis of Political Islam, The Saturday Essay, YAROSLAV TROFIMOV, July 22, 2016

²⁴ Ibid. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-crisis-of-political-islam-1469223880>

has increased with greater financial and administrative resources for provinces. So far though, this is work in progress.

One area is common between Pakistan and Turkey. Instability in Afghanistan and in Syria, respectively, pose a major challenge to border security of both countries. Their policy of involvement in the neighbour's affairs further complicates this matter. While Mr. Erdogan may perhaps change this in Turkey, there is yet no review in Pakistan. The fallout from these involvements have weakened both states.

Discussion about which institution in Pakistan has the support of the people is vacuous. There is considerable alienation among the people, as neither group has done much for them. To earn their support, Pakistan must review its policies in a number of ways. Continual power struggle between institutions harms the state. It is critical to maintain an equilibrium so that all players devote their time to meeting responsibilities. As a diverse country, Pakistan must embrace the many shades of opinions and differences. It has done this well in Balochistan. So far, it seems that all parties use these differences to promote their interests in a continued game of shifting alliances.

While a threat to constitutional rule seems unlikely in Pakistan, there is a more serious danger to state stability. Continuous failure by elected officials to provide development, improve living standards or justice has forced people to look for alternatives. The inability of law enforcers to ensure stability in the country creates insecurity and uncertainty. This situation affords non state actors to offer themselves as an option.

The main lesson from the coup attempt in Turkey is the need for consensus and pluralism. Pakistan must minimize competition among various parts of the state to develop consensus on a national agenda. It suggests focus on challenges within the country and amity with neighbours to secure borders. The other lesson is that weapons must remain in the hands of state institutions and not with armed militia. For now, these are distant possibilities that no player in Pakistan is willing to pursue.

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