

The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

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A Coup Attempt Unfolds

It seemed a normal Friday night, as much as one could speak of normalcy in Turkey these days, given the developments of the past year, from the numerous terror attacks by both ISIS and the PKK to the erratic turns in Turkish foreign policy. Just as most Turkish citizens were getting ready to draw in, around 10 pm, Turkish social media reported troops and tanks on both bridges in Istanbul shutting off traffic from Asia to Europe. A video circulated on Twitter of a soldier urging a civilian to go home, emphasizing that this was not a drill. Soon after, gun and helicopter fire were reported in Ankara, near General Staff headquarters. As the international media picked up the news, it became clear that the state broadcaster, TRT, had been taken over. Around the same time, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım called into another news channel to say that there was an “uprising” underway. More reports came in of skirmishes around major police stations and that the General Chief of Staff, Hulusi Akar, had been taken hostage. Jets were flying over the capital. An anchorwoman on TRT read a statement declaring that the Turkish Armed Forces had taken control of the country.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had been vacationing in Marmaris, and for the first few hours his exact location was unknown. Around midnight, an announcer on CNNTurk held up a mobile phone during a live broadcast, allowing Erdoğan to issue—via the Apple video chat application Facetime—a call to his supporters to take to the streets. At some point, Erdoğan boarded his plane and headed for Istanbul. Later reports indicated he was persuaded to do so by first battalion commander and four-star general Ümit Dündar, who apparently made the case that this was a safer course of action than heading to Ankara. Landing in Istanbul, Erdoğan spoke to the media directly and reiterated his call for his supporters to take to the streets to thwart the coup. His followers quickly heeded his call.

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After 2 am on Saturday, government forces began to re-establish control. Jets and helicopters flew over Istanbul and Ankara through the night, targeting various sites and shattering windows. The parliament was among the major buildings bombed during the night. There were also deadly confrontations between soldiers and anti-coup protestors; soldiers opened fire on civilians on several occasions, and the protestors lynched some soldiers. It should also be noted, however, that many foot soldiers interacting with civilians on the street did not seem aware of the details of the coup plan and surrendered quickly when confronted by civilian protestors. By the time some semblance of order was established the next day, more than 250 people had been killed, and more than 2,000 people had been injured. In the meantime, a military helicopter carrying eight officers landed in Greece, seeking asylum. In the afternoon, parliament held an extraordinary session and all parties signed an anti-coup declaration.

The government acted swiftly. Over the weekend, it arrested more than 6,000 officers and almost 3,000 judges and prosecutors, including a justice of the Constitutional Court. By Monday, about 9,000 police officers, 30 governors, and 50 subgovernors were suspended from their positions. The government continues to encourage its supporters via text messaging to stay on the streets in order to protect “democracy.” Throughout the weekend there were many social media reports of Alevi neighborhoods and Syrian businesses around the country being targeted by government supporters. The situation remains volatile.

Who Was Behind the Coup Attempt?

At the moment, there are two popular narratives circulating about who was responsible for the coup. Both theories have domestic and international subscribers.

Narrative One. The official state narrative is that the coup attempt was executed by a small pro-Gülen faction within the army. Fethullah Gülen is a 75-year old cleric who lives in the United States (with permanent resident status) and who was a close ally of Erdoğan until 2013. Gülen controls a network of schools around the world and has a sizeable following of supporters, many whose education was once supported by Gülen. It was during the movement’s alliance with the AKP government that many Gülen supporters advanced to positions of significance in all state institutions. In December 2013, however, the alliance between Gülen and Erdoğan was publicly shattered when a pro-Gülen faction within the judiciary brought very serious corruption charges against several of Erdoğan’s ministers and close allies, though the reasons for the fallout predate these developments and remain murky. Erdoğan was able to contain the damage from the graft probe and since then has attempted to purge all supporters of Gülen from his party and various state institutions, especially the judiciary and the police. The Turkish government subsequently declared the Gülen movement a terrorist organization and charges were brought against the organization. Several businesses, including major banks and media organizations controlled by the Gülen movement, were confiscated

and brought under state control during this process. From the very early hours of the coup attempt, pro-government media started reporting that Gülenists were responsible. The Turkish government has demanded that the United States repatriate Gülen to Turkey so that he can face charges.

This narrative has had serious implications for Turkish-American relations. On Saturday, electricity to the U.S. air base in İncirlik was cut off and Turkey's Minister of Labor, Süleyman Soylu, publicly accused the United States of supporting the coup attempt. Some pro-government Turkish newspapers published this accusation. The official U.S. position on the coup was to support the democratically-elected government of Turkey, but U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement on Sunday indicating that allegations that the United States was behind the coup hurt relations between the two states. By the end of the day on Sunday it was reported that anti-ISIS operations out of İncirlik had resumed, though a U.S. Federal Aviation Administration ban on flights originating from Turkey to the United States remained in place until Wednesday. There were reports on Sunday that the Turkish commanding officer of İncirlik and almost a dozen İncirlik service members had been arrested.

Narrative Two. The other popular narrative was that the coup attempt was Erdoğan's "Reichstag fire" – a staged event to justify a more drastic move toward dictatorship by Erdoğan. This narrative was very popular among the anti-AKP crowd on social media, and supporters of this narrative point to the poor execution of the coup and the sweeping arrests of thousands of judges next day as evidence. Supporters of this theory especially question why coup organizers read a statement on television before they had full control of key state institutions. Another popular question is why the coup plotters did not shoot down Erdoğan's plane when apparently their F16s had it in their sights while he was traveling from Marmaris to Istanbul.

What Really Happened?

Several independent journalists are reporting that before July 15, Erdoğan's AKP government had already drawn up lists of military personnel known to be Gülen sympathizers and planned to arrest them on spying charges or force them into retirement in August.

If this is correct, the impending charges could have motivated the pro-Gülen officers in the military to hastily execute the coup as a last ditch effort to save themselves, which would explain some of their operational errors. This line of reasoning gives more credence to the official narrative (if not the official explanation of the motivations of the officers).

However, if we judge the extent of the involvement of military personnel both by the number of arrests and the ranks of the arrestees, the official narrative that this was only

a small faction of Gülenist officers also takes a hit. At the time of writing, numerous commanders of major battalions were under arrest—one third of all brigadier generals and nearly a fifth of all major generals—103 generals in total, which has essentially left Turkey without a functional military chain-of-command.

It is difficult to believe that all arrested military personnel are in fact Gülen supporters. Until relatively recently, the Turkish military has been extremely vigilant about purging from its ranks any officer with any kind of Islamist sympathies. Although it is possible that some would have been able to hide their sympathies, it seems unreasonable that hundreds (or thousands) of officers were hiding Gülenist sympathies for decades without getting caught. Some of the generals arrested are at the end of their careers, meaning they rose in rank during the years when the military was staunchly Kemalist. It is unlikely that so many would have escaped detection. Indeed, there are now reports of officers who did not actively participate in the coup but were arrested anyway.

The wide swath of arrests across the military and all levels of the state bureaucracy suggests several possibilities, at least one of which is highly likely. This is that Erdoğan is using the coup to purge from the military (and all state institutions) anyone who is not fiercely loyal to him, not just the Gülenists. Another possibility is that the coup, as originally planned, involved a coalition of forces, not just Gülenists but possibly Kemalists and others, indicating widespread discontent within state ranks. It is conceivable that when the Gülenists moved the coup timeline forward in an attempt to save themselves, other factions did not join in, leaving the Gülenists exposed and twisting in the wind. If there were other groups, however, they did not actively attempt to stop the coup either. Erdoğan would know or suspect this, hence the sweeping arrests. A third, less probable, possibility is that a faction within the state aligned with Erdoğan could be using the opportunity to take out other rival factions. There have been rumors for months that Erdoğan is not as powerful as he seems and that the Turkish “deep state” has successfully reconstituted itself.

What’s Next?

Quite simply, dark times are ahead. The fallout from the coup attempt has effectively left Turkey without a functional military at a time when Turkey faces serious military challenges. The command vacuum could be overcome quickly, but the damage to morale will have long-term repercussions. Pictures and videos of uniformed soldiers being lynched by civilians or abused by police during interrogations are unlikely to be forgotten quickly.

If developments over this past weekend lead to a cessation of ongoing hostilities in Turkey’s southeast region, it may be a silver lining. Far more likely, however, is that the Kurdish PKK will take advantage of the situation and re-escalate its efforts. Given how fraught the situation has been in Kurdish majority cities in the last year, it is hard to

predict what fallout will occur. Certainly though, Erdoğan's newfound alliance with the military against the Kurds has taken a serious blow. If the above scenario of deeper support for the coup within the military is correct—or if Erdoğan even suspects it of being correct—he will no longer be as trusting of the military. He may be tempted to substitute in police structures, which are generally more loyal to him, in place of the military to oversee this conflict, which would move the fight between the PKK and the Turkish state squarely to the street level (which was already starting to happen with the military, with harrowing consequences). It is also unclear how well trained the Turkish police is for dealing with such a situation.

There is also the well-documented presence in Turkey of ISIS operatives, who have openly declared war against the country. This is evidenced by the June attack at Ataturk airport that claimed the lives of more than 40 people. And, of course, there is the civil war in neighboring Syria.

With a coup attempt on top of so many challenges, Turkey appears incredibly militarily and politically vulnerable.

At the same time, the state is doing immense damage to its own judiciary. Given that close to 3,000 judges and prosecutors have been arrested, it is hard to see how the judicial system will continue to function as normal. Furthermore, these arrests come at a time when the judiciary had already been subject to several purges. Given that “rule of law” in Turkey was already beleaguered, the damage being done will be long lasting.

The Erdoğan regime successfully played its trump card in calling its supporters to the streets. The participation of civilians in protecting the regime was encouraged by continuous prayers issued from mosques and with text messages sent by the state urging them to stay on the streets. Though there is no direct evidence to suggest so, it may be assumed that at least some AKP decision-makers are aware of the U.S.-sponsored 1953 coup in Iran against Mohammad Mosaddeq. The first coup attempt against Mosaddeq was unsuccessful after which point Mosaddeq's supporters on the streets returned home. A few days later a second coup was successfully executed. The knowledge of this history may be what is motivating the continuous calls for citizens to stay on the streets and statements that the danger is not yet over (especially in light of accusations by various AKP politicians that the United States is behind the coup).

However commendable it may be for civilians to stand up against an illegitimate coup attempt, this situation has serious downsides. The greatest danger is that it will increase political polarization in an already highly divided country. Despite the fact that the coup had very little support from the population, even judging by social media, and despite the fact that all major parties took clear anti-coup stances, the demographic profile of the anti-coup protestors on the streets is very specific. They seem to consist of pro-Erdoğan cultists and radical Islamists. Now these groups have free reign to roam the streets as

protectors of the “democratic” regime. As noted above, there are already multiple reports of mob violence against Alevis, as well as Syrian refugees. There have been reports of vandalism against churches. Reports of the lynching of foot soldiers could perhaps be put in the context of the extraordinary conditions of Friday night, but they also set a dangerous precedent, especially if perpetrators are not held accountable in any way, a likely scenario. There are serious reasons to be concerned about the way forward – this genie is out of the bottle and will be hard to put back in. This is very bad news for a country that was already on the brink of civil war.

Conclusion

Everything will depend on Erdoğan’s next steps. His past behavior does not give confidence that he will pursue a conciliatory agenda that will unite a polarized country. Now that one of his worse fears has come true, he is likely to pursue a scorched earth policy. If he is in fact weaker than he appears, he may not even have a choice.

One thing is clear: after this weekend, Turkey has entered a new and worse chapter in its political history.