

The Unresolved Internal Struggle beyond the Turkish Coup

Written by Marianna Charountak

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MARIANNA CHAROUNTAK, AUG 9 2016

The recent coup in Turkey is neither a new phenomenon, nor a surprising event. Instead, the coup tactics have been a common practice throughout the state's modern history with the aim to restore a more secular, and previously a more Kemalist, order as well as terminate periods of uncontrolled political leadership.

Turkey's failure to preserve an ambitious multi-dimensional foreign policy, economic and political scandals combined with a series of domestic incidents such as the Gezi Park protests, the refugee crisis, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's attempts to empower the Presidency and the continuation of the fight against the Kurds, have all raised concerns and led once again to the current military intervention.

Contrary to the mainstream and the common notion that the military was eliminated by the AK Parti's leadership (The Justice and Development Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) I have long argued that although Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has, to some degree, succeeded in counterbalancing the military apparatus in Turkey, this does not mean that he had eliminated it, or even managed to gain total control. This continues to be the case as the military in Turkey is a key component within the Turkish domestic structure. Instead, this would have meant structural changes, and definitely not the restrictive Turkish structure as seen over recent decades. Although the AK Parti and its rise in power signalled a turning point in Turkish politics in various forms, one of which has been the President's efforts to control military intervention in Turkish political life, this proved difficult to be entirely successful.

The 26 May 1960 coup d'état that was followed by a second one in 1971, and then a third – perhaps the most severe in Turkish political history – on 12 September 1980. Thereafter the history of Turkish coups reached its height with the military's 'velvet' coup of 28 February 1997 (known as the 28 February process). More recently an 'electronic' coup in 2007 proved unsuccessful^[1], but its characteristics could be seen in last month's attempted coup.^[2] Indeed the case of the 'Ergenekon', a clandestine organization composed mainly of military officials who planned to overthrow the government, along with a series of other scandals such as the 2004 coup plans by the Turkish Generals that were disclosed by the Turkish magazine *Nokta*, are indicative of the deep roots that the military apparatus has held in Turkey: more than half of Turkey's Presidents have come from a military background.

Thus the attempted coup, following the historical past of Turkey, bolstered by an already dire domestic situation with successive crises, and a disappointed public opinion that left a political vacuum that this coup hoped to fill, aimed to limit of the powers of the political leadership, as has been the case traditionally. Moreover, the state's continuous fears about a settlement of the Kurdish issue in Syria, *vis-à-vis* Turkish foreign policy objectives of ensuring a seat in the negotiation table in the post-Middle Eastern order settlement, explains also the culmination of this multi-dimensional internal crisis. Probably one of the main elements that gave leverage for the military was the political leadership's quicksand approach of using, on and off – for electoral victory purposes – not only the nationalist votes, but also a mixed discourse of nationalism, Islamism and even the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Note here the historic use of the word 'Kurdistan' for the first time in Erdoğan's 2013 speech in Diyarbakir.

Yet current policies against the military do not constitute the first attempt to clear out opposition elements within the army structure. In fact, the '*Balyoz*' (Sledgehammer) Operation, an alleged military coup plan against the ruling party

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organized by Turkish military officers that the daily newspaper *Taraf* brought into light (January, 2010), seems to have heralded this purging during the AK Parti era.

The success of Turkey's peace process becomes even more imperative given the repercussions of the state's endeavours to formulate a multi-dimensional foreign policy which revealed explicitly that independence from the international factor, which stands in favour of Turkish internal peace, stability and progress *vis-à-vis* the latest incidents between Russia and Turkey as well as frictions in the Turkish-US relations, is quite unrealistic. This is the case as dynamics introduced by international, regional and domestic factors appear to exert greater influence in changing the direction of regional policies. Thus Turkey's redefinition of itself on the basis of a clear strategy and vision both internally and externally about what kind of Turkey the political leadership wants will determine to a great extent the future nature of the Turkish political structure. To sketch these out: in or out of the EU, peace or war with the Kurds, consensus and dialogue or conflict with the other political parties concerning a constructive constitutional process and finally a revisionist or a non-interference policy in the region.

Indeed, Erdoğan has his own issues to deal with. He needs to address pressing domestic concerns such as the Kurdish issue and the struggle for power with the Gülen movement, the challenges posed by Syria and the Kurds on Turkey's borders and the constant threat from IS. In this sense it is clear that even though Gülen is a determinant in Turkey's domestic politics, the picture is much bigger.

Turkey appears today to be in a critical position – more reactionary, than defensive – due to domestic upheavals and external challenges, at a time when Kurds in Syria attempt to finalize their plans to establish a new federal system for the North while fighting Islamic State (IS) in the Manbij border area. Although currently instability reigns at the heart of the Middle East where the Kurds are located, the Kurdish movement in Turkey, and, more specifically, the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers' Party), along with all the Kurdish political representation in Turkey could perceive this situation as an opportunity to facilitate Kurdish unity, develop relations with other Kurdish political actors and reactivate the peace process as a realistic remedy to deal with internal disorder effectively.

Notes

[1] “Unfortunately we show many *coups d'état*. The second one in the post-modern era occurred even via technology, with electronic declarations (2007)”; See Interview by researcher with Oruç, Yunus, District President of AKP in Kayapınar, (Diyarbakir, 3 June 2009). Here, it is implied the message entitled “terrorism” which appeared on the General Staff's Internet site in June 2007. The message simply consisted of a military warning against AKP's government so that Erdoğan would order the government to pursue military operations in Northern Iraq against PKK rebels. The message aimed on one hand to threaten the government indirectly, so that if it refused to walk in the footsteps of the military, “the time has come for some things” and on the other to influence public opinion in favour of the rationality of this policy.

[2] This was recently revealed through the US “secret” documents sent by Ambassador in Turkey –W. Robert Pearson –to Washington (April 18, 2003) stating that “the office of the chief of General Staff still continues to interfere extensively in political life, trying to shape national politics” whereas “Turkish sources repeatedly spoke even about scandals in military (such as) a deal struck in the military establishment to sell medical supplies to the PKK” in Ergil, Doğu, *Today's Zaman*, “WikiLeaks on Turkey”, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-239614-wikileaks-on-turkey.html> (30/03/2011), (last accessed April 2011).

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(Routledge, 2010) and Kurdish policies in Syria under the Arab Uprisings: A revisiting of IR in the New Middle Eastern Order', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.36, Issue 2, pp. 337-356 (2015).