

A Cynical Report Card on the Turkish Game of Thrones

Written by Oğuzhan Göksel

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OğUZHAN GökSEL, AUG 13 2016

Lately, Turkish politics has become so bizarre that some experts (e.g. Akkoyunlu 2016) utilize analogies derived from fantasy fiction to explain the situation to Western audiences. Quite simply there does not seem to be any actual historical precedents that could shed light on the unexpected course of events. Consider the following summary of the last decade: an unelected elite (Kemalists) control most of political life via their influence over the judiciary and the military. A charismatic populist politician (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) wins election after election, yet cannot rule independently. In fact, the elite threaten to overthrow him with a coup (in 2007) if he insists on steering away from their vision. Seeking to weaken the elite's hold, the politician allies himself with an influential cleric (Fetullah Gülen) who possesses an extremely large network of loyal followers. Step by step; the politician replaces members of the old elite in every institution with acolytes of his cleric friend. The old elite loses its hegemony after a series of investigations (the *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer* cases). Eventually, the cleric – adoringly referred to as ‘Master Preacher’ by his fanatical followers – begins to see himself as the true power behind the throne. His network orchestrates an elaborate plan (the 17-25 December crisis of 2013) to arrest the politician on grounds of corruption. The plan fails and the politician leads a counter-attack. Little did he know, the cleric had already placed his followers in strategic positions inside the military. These forces launch a coup on the fateful night of 15th July 2016 in a futile attempt to overthrow the politician who as of now is finally free of all notable rivals and can reign supreme.

Though it may sound like it, the above text is not the synopsis of the last season of the acclaimed television show *Game of Thrones* – which focused on the clash between a power-hungry cleric and a monarch – but an abridged story of what has transpired before our unbelieving eyes in Turkey. Now, let's imagine another story in which the business world and armed forces of a country are infiltrated by sleeper agents who hide their true identities from everyone around them for many years, only to be awakened at the ‘right moment’ for serving their overlord with maximum effectiveness. This was a key element in the plot of numerous anti-Soviet propaganda novels and movies set during the Cold War as well as in that of the 2003 reboot of the classic 1970s show *Battlestar Galactica*, which contains human-looking robots (the Cylons) whose minds are controlled by a computer mainframe across the galaxy. Many usually assume that such complex conspiracies may only occur in fiction, yet what has happened in Turkey from the 1980s onwards resembles them, as the Gülen movement (widely referred to as the *Cemaat* or the Gülenist Terrorist Organization/*FETO*) has systematically placed its members in key posts. For instance, one F-16 fighter pilot supposedly hid his secret affiliation with the Cemaat even from his wife and family for over a decade and finally revealed it on the night of the 15th July coup attempt by dropping bombs on the Turkish parliament in Ankara (*T24* 2016). Lying is normally considered as a sin in Islam, yet Gülen has developed a pseudo-religious exemption via invoking the principle of *taqiyyah*. Accordingly, members of the Cemaat are permitted to deceive others regarding their true identity because they are under threat of persecution.

Most people within and beyond Turkey first realized the scale of the danger on the 15th July 2016, but the Cemaat had long become a menace for the socio-economic and political life of the country – far before the post-2013 clash between the organization and their erstwhile ally, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. I personally encountered the omnipresent influence of Gülenists at various stages of my education and academic career in Turkey and Britain. In the winter of 2013, I was nearing the end of my doctoral studies and visited a number of universities in search of an academic post. I can hardly forget the conversation I had with the hiring committee members at a notable public university in Istanbul:

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Deputy Dean: "Welcome! Have you come with a message from Pennsylvania [where Gülen still lives in exile] by any chance?"

Me: "I am sorry? I am not sure what you mean, professor".

I must have looked quite shocked and my reaction triggered a round of laughter from the committee. I continued with a tragicomical explanation:

Me: "I had sent you my academic CV and list of publications, professor. I have not come here with the support of an influential person".

Deputy Dean: "You have been away from Turkey for some years. I do not think that you know how things work. We actually read your work and reviewed your file. We strongly believe that you have potential as a young academic. However, you must understand that our hands are tied at the moment. We cannot hire you based solely on your academic skills, because the chancellor would veto your appointment unless you provide a reference from Cemaat".

Me: "I cannot do that. I do not have any connections with them".

Deputy Dean: "Then I am very sorry. We are not with them, but the chancellor is. We actually need at least three assistant professors; however, applicants cannot provide a reference from the Cemaat and the chancellor refuses to appoint anyone who is not a member. So, we have not been able to hire anyone for more than a year. We are all teaching five or six courses per term".

The above interview was my personal experience, but such a dialogue could have happened at that instant in thousands of offices across Turkey. The power and reach of the globe-spanning network of Cemaat was the most widely known 'secret' in the country. Until 2013, the following expression was commonly used to explain the state of affairs: "nobody knows where the Cemaat ends and where the Party [AKP] begins". Previous governments had also collaborated with Cemaat in the 1980s and 1990s, yet the organization gained a large portion of its considerable economic and political power in the 2000s due to its alliance with the AKP (Bajalan 2016). Cemaat members started to perceive themselves as the kingmakers of the AKP's reign. After the elimination of their common opponent (i.e. the Kemalist elite), a power struggle between two influential leaders (Erdoğan and Gülen) was inevitable – setting in motion the turn of events culminating in the failed 15th July coup.

Much of the ongoing debates on the 15th July coup within mainstream Western media are characterized by a superficial and Eurocentric understanding of Turkey. Many observers (e.g. Malsin 2016; Fuller 2016; Lendman 2016; Jones and Gurses 2016; Piker 2016) criticize what they perceive as 'an ongoing shift to despotism' under President Erdoğan without uttering a single sentence of caution about the potential maladies that could have been inflicted on democratization had the junta been successful in overthrowing the government. There is indeed reason for concern about Turkey's post-coup trajectory which is shaped by discussions over re-implementing capital punishment, suspension of the European Convention on Human Rights and an extensive purge of tens of thousands of people within the bureaucracy, academia and the media in investigations that may or may not turn into a witch-hunt of all political opponents. Nevertheless, a balanced account of the power struggle in Turkish politics is needed – one that has proven elusive within the existing literature possibly due to the established soft-power of Cemaat in the Western world, the reductionist tendency of Western media to explain matters via simplistic 'black-and-white' dichotomies and/or an acute Erdoğan-phobia.

Cemaat's hard-power capacity may have been spent on the violent night of the 15th of July, but its soft-power reserves appear to be still intact in the academia and media of the US and various Western European countries. The influence of Cemaat over *émigré* Turkish intelligentsia first became apparent in 2013 when a group of distinguished academics suddenly turned against the AKP administration after the organization clashed with the party in the so-called 17-25 February Process. It was as if these were not the same people who published numerous widely circulated articles and books that glorified the AKP rule and praised the supposed ability of the party to create a 'Turkish Model' via synthesizing Islamic values with a highly developed capitalist economy and a consolidated

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democratic regime. In reality, the so-called Turkish Model already had a number of shortcomings in terms of democratic practice and human development, yet these were overlooked by Cemaat affiliated scholars because their organization was then involved in an alliance with the government. Regardless of their dubious reliability, however, today these figures continue to dominate most of the writings on Turkish politics within the Western world. The AKP has actually proved incapable of countering their hegemonic voice and it would not be an exaggeration to argue that Cemaat is currently winning 'the battle of discourses' over the perception of the 15th July coup.

A dominant idea that is widely used in Western narratives nowadays is that 'coups in Turkey are always launched to put democracy back on track and to prevent divergences from Kemal Atatürk's secular-democratic path' (see Piker 2016; Fuller 2016). Another popular argument is that the 15th July was 'a false flag operation designed [by the AKP itself] to create the conditions in which Erdoğan could launch a clampdown on his remaining opponents' (see Martin 2016). These are typical examples that reveal the intensity of the Eurocentric lens used by those who comment on the politics and society of non-western countries such as Turkey. Still, it is surprising that misguided ideas which portray murderous juntas as 'saviors of democracy' and conspiracy theories which border on the surreal can be easily presented in mainstream media as 'objective' reports of the situation. Immediately after the terrorist attacks on 11th September 2001, the US administration declared 'war on terror' – launching military operations against Afghanistan and Iraq as well as building what can be termed as 'a surveillance state' within the US via the Patriot Act. Afterwards, no distinguished commentator and scholar caring about their reputation would have published ludicrous opinion pieces which claimed that 9/11 was a 'bogus attack' designed by the Bush administration to realize the neo-conservative project in the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, when a state of emergency was declared in France in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, notable commentators of Western media did not rush to claim that the attacks were all part of a conspiracy by President Hollande to ramp up his falling popularity ratings in opinion polls. Moreover, Western academia and media would not evaluate a military coup in any Western society as a method to save a faltering democracy – even if an incumbent administration is steadily shifting the political system towards an illiberal direction.

Despite the rise of Post-Colonial critics of Eurocentrism, much of the Western academic and media narratives on politics of non-western countries such as Turkey are still characterized by 'double standards'. As such, it has been systematically normalized to put forward arguments that could never be voiced out loud in the context of a political situation in the West. If Western governments, media and academia genuinely wish to spread democratic ideals and practice across the world; they should adhere to a single universal standard that would be applicable to all societies. Instead, the predominant attitude is to adjust the standards based on deeply entrenched biases about other societies.

In the context of post-coup Turkey today, we are in need of nuanced and balanced analyses (e.g. Bajalan 2016) that point to shortcomings of democratic practice under AKP rule as well highlighting potential dangers posed by fundamentalist groups such as the Cemaat. Violations of democratic principles (e.g. freedom of expression and minority rights) and the ongoing shift of Turkey towards a majoritarian understanding of democracy that reduces the concept to the holding of regular elections is well-known; however we have to ask ourselves the following question: could a military coup that would arrest the members of an elected government and disband an elected parliament really solve shortcomings of democratic practice? Moreover, what kind of a political order would have emerged out of the 15th July coup organized by a secretive organization led by an enigmatic cleric? The successful outcome of such a coup would certainly not be a liberal democracy in the Western fashion, but probably an Iran-like theocratic totalitarian republic ruled by an unaccountable supreme leader – Gülen himself. Democracy, after all, is a regime that gradually manifests over time under suitable domestic socio-economic conditions. Therefore, it cannot possibly be super-imposed on a society from above and be expected to artificially sustain itself.

The experience of the 15th of July holds a number of lessons which will surely be thoroughly studied in forthcoming years. I believe that one of the most significant issues in this context is to comprehend the path that has produced the coup. The coup was mainly caused by the following factors: after the AKP came to power in 2002, it entered into an alliance with the Cemaat and, within the context of a 'silent revolution', started to build a new republic that would replace the Kemalist Turkey. While members of the Kemalist 'old state' were eradicated within the bureaucracy, judiciary, military, media and academia their positions were filled with Cemaat members. Rather than following the

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orders of the government, the new elite has become 'a state within the state' and tried to overthrow the AKP. For instance, many high-ranking coup plotters in the military were young officers that could never have reached their positions if the Kemalist hierarchy of old had not been eliminated in the 2000s. Therefore, much of the short-term responsibility for the rise of Cemaat rests on the earlier policies of the government. However, what had prompted a democratically-elected government to enter into an alliance with a secret organization?

A balanced account must acknowledge that the long established Kemalist mode of behavior in Turkish politics is also responsible for the ascent of Cemaat. Before Cemaat members rose within the ranks of public institutions, Kemalists had a monopoly over military, judiciary and most of the bureaucracy. Though approximately half of the electorate voted for the AKP, the Kemalist elite did not trust the party to remain loyal to secularism and the official republican ideology designed by Atatürk. Though the AKP was the architect of many democratic reforms in the early 2000s, before it showed any signs of an illiberal approach to governance, the party was threatened by the military command with a coup and also faced a party ban by the Kemalist-controlled Constitutional Court. In order to survive the Kemalist onslaught, the AKP administration formed an alliance with the Cemaat. Hence, in the long-term, the Kemalists' early aggressive behavior towards the AKP sowed the seeds of their political decline as well as almost causing the fall of the AKP's own hegemony on 15th July.

In the last decade, the 'Turkish Game of Thrones' – almost as deadly as its counterpart in the fictional world of George R. R. Martin – had three main competing factions that have struggled for power. After the coup was defeated with the help of thousands of civilian protestors in the streets, President Erdoğan seems to have consolidated his hegemony. Surprisingly, the Kemalists – who were purged in the 2000s – also appear to be the winners of the post-coup situation as many of them have been reinstated to their positions in the military and bureaucracy. Moreover, the large-scale demonstration of 7th August in Yenikapi (Istanbul) seemingly united President Erdoğan and the AKP administration with the opposition, namely the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) and the MHP (Nationalist Action Party). It is yet to be seen if the post-coup unity of three major political parties will remain durable. Since 2013, the country has been struggling with intense political instability in the form of terrorist bombings, crises with foreign powers (e.g. Syria, Iran and Russia), an ongoing internal conflict against the PKK and recently a military coup. In fact, each of the last three years has been worse than the previous one. As the notorious phrase from *Game of Thrones* goes, the long night of Turkish politics has been dark and full of terrors so far. How much more political instability could the Turkish economy and social life bear? Let's hope that we shall not find out as the country is in desperate need of peace, stability and security.

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